Teaching with Primary Sources

CASE #29   # One Class, Five Ways

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES ENGAGED FROM *GUIDELINES FOR PRIMARY SOURCE LITERACY* BY THIS CASE STUDY

2.A. Identify the possible locations of primary sources.

2.B. Use appropriate, efficient, and effective search strategies in order to locate primary sources. Be familiar with the most common ways primary sources are described, such as catalog records and archival finding aids.

2.D. 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.E. Recognize and understand the policies and procedures that affect access to primary sources, and that these differ across repositories, databases, and collections.

3.B. 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.

3.C. Understand that a primary source may exist in a variety of iterations, including excerpts, transcriptions, and translations, due to publication, copying, and other transformations.

4.E. Factor physical and material elements into the interpretation of primary sources including the relationship between containers.

4.F. Demonstrate historical empathy, curiosity about the past, and appreciation for historical sources and historical actors.

5.B. Use primary sources in a manner that respects privacy rights and cultural contexts.

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https://nyuad.nyu.edu/en

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Introduction and Institutional Context

At New York University Abu Dhabi (NYUAD), one of three degree-granting universities of the NYU Global Network and located in the Abu Dhabi Emirate of the United Arab Emirates, the Library's Archives and Special Collections repository acquires and preserves materials that are available to NYUAD students, faculty and staff, as well as researchers from the UAE and abroad. The goal of the program is to provide access to rare and unique primary source materials that support the teaching and research needs of students and faculty, and to promote scholarship and interest in the history of the UAE, the Gulf, the Arabian Peninsula, and the wider region. In addition, NYUAD's Archives and Special Collections (ASC) houses the University Archives. As a young institution—NYUAD opened its doors to its first undergraduate class in 2010—a majority of the University Archives materials are digital archives in a variety of formats. Similar to other University Archives programs, the collecting scope includes acquiring records of institutional knowledge; documenting community memory and campus life experience; and serving as a repository for selected research projects and collections.

NYUAD archivist librarians in ASC have had the opportunity to teach primary source literacy while supporting a number of undergraduate courses, specifically, the undergraduate Digital Humanities course "The Digital Archive,"[1] a cross-disciplinary course in the NYUAD Core[2] that "explores the implications of digital archive creation tools and practices for historical memory and understanding." As the primary archival collecting repository on campus, ASC has been a natural collaborator to host the Digital Archive class, in the context of the course's archival readings, and other questions and themes of the syllabus.

This case study is written collaboratively by NYUAD ASC academic librarian and archivist Lauren Kata, and Digital Archive course developer and NYUAD professor, Suphan Kirmizialtin. Reflecting on our collaboration, we consider its evolution, and the alignment of the Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy with the course's learning objectives.

Suphan, as the course developer and professor, brings an interdisciplinary perspective, blending her expertise as a historian and a digital humanist. She emphasizes the importance of primary source literacy in fostering critical thinking skills. This approach is central not only for students pursuing a degree in history but also for those in other fields, as working with primary sources cultivates transferable intellectual skills. These skills include critical questioning of sources that are considered authoritative, understanding how these sources are curated and presented, and recognizing the decisions involved in building repositories of information that shape our collective identity and memory. For Suphan, discussing the nuances of archival power dynamics, absences, silences, and curatorial choices is crucial. These discussions are not just academically significant but also play a vital role in broadening students' social and historical awareness. (2D, 2E)

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[1] Kirmizialtin, Suphan. "The Digital Archive" course syllabus. December 29, 2023. https://sites.google.com/nyu.edu/digitalarchivefall23/home.
[2] New York University Abu Dhabi. "Core Curriculum." December 29, 2023. https://nyuad.nyu.edu/en/academics/undergraduate/core-curriculum.html

As a member of NYUAD Library's academic librarian team working primarily with University Archives, Lauren's primary goals align with one of the ASC department's outreach objectives: to develop opportunities for students to become aware that their institution is investing in its institutional history. She also aims to encourage engagement with the University's history beyond "top-down" narratives and to help students see themselves and their predecessors as active participants in creating material and knowledge that will one day be archival. Furthermore, she emphasizes the importance of understanding the context of archives as much as their content. (2A, 2D, 3C, 4F)

NYU Abu Dhabi's global student body, encompassing a spectrum of nationalities, adds a unique depth to our case study. Students' diverse backgrounds, key to our liberal arts curriculum, enrich the exploration of primary source literacy by bringing varied cultural and linguistic perspectives. This diversity deepens classroom discussions and broadens understanding of the cultural and historical contexts within archival materials.

Students in the Digital Archive course come to ASC sessions prepared with a foundational understanding of archives. The sessions foster an interplay of primary source literacy, digital literacy, and information literacy, enriched by the inclusion of local history and culture. Discussions extend to privacy, inclusivity, diversity, and copyright issues, with a focus on the mediation role of archivists and database creators. The class engages with a variety of materials, including textual, visual, audio, video, and born-digital archives, highlighting the continuum between these formats and underscoring the multifaceted nature of archival research. (2C, 3C, 4E, 5B)

As of the writing of this case study, we have just finished our fifth semester of collaboration. Since its inception in Spring 2022, the course has consistently incorporated a full week dedicated to engaging with the ASC and its collections. The class visits, typically held twice for 75 minutes, include both an "analog" session—focusing on a presentation about the department and hands-on activities with physical archival and manuscript collections, led by the Head of ASC; and a "digital" session—centering on digital archives using University Archives collections, guided by Lauren.

While the teaching outline for the analog visit has primarily followed the same structure throughout the time of the collaboration, Lauren's digital class outline that utilizes University Archives materials has substantially evolved, for a variety of reasons: in response to changing pandemic restrictions, to student feedback, to the opening of newly processed collections, and in a purposeful move toward an interactive and participatory learning pedagogy. In our narrative, we look at five different iterations of a class outline prepared for the same course and syllabus. Preparing this case study allows us to reflect and assess the pros and cons of the different approaches we've taken, and where we may continue to focus in the future.

Narrative

The Digital Archive class visit to ASC has evolved since it was first offered in the Spring of 2022. Although the University had begun a hybrid remote/in-person structure for many of its classes during the 2021-2022 academic year, this course was offered primarily as a remote course. The Head of ASC during this academic year, while the institution slowly eased back into in-person classes again, was able to arrange for a few one-time exceptions for small class in-person visits.

Thus, the structure we landed on for that first semester was to plan on two sessions, or a week dedicated with ASC: hosting the first session remotely on Zoom, followed by an in-person visit to ASC with everyone following institutional mask mandates.

In non-pandemic circumstances, it is typical that class visits to ASC are often the first time that students become aware of our program and department. During the COVID pandemic, this felt even more true, as several groups of students had not yet had the opportunity to walk through and tour the physical library as part of their orientations. Referencing "that room in the back of the library" didn't have meaning for many students in Spring 2022. In the initial session, envisioned for a Zoom classroom, Lauren's presentation was designed as an introduction to the ASC, outlining its activities and its collections. This was intended to lay the groundwork for the students and prepare them for the subsequent in-person session with the Head of ASC, which would offer a hands-on experience.

This iteration of The Digital Archive class's visit to ASC was relatively passive, primarily consisting of a presentation. The presentation ambitiously aimed to cover several topics, such as archivists' backgrounds and values, the collecting areas of the department, how collecting repositories may be understood, and finding aids. A "flipped classroom" exercise invited students to do a number of things on their own ahead of class: familiarize themselves with the look and feel of a finding aid, consider what a researcher can learn about a collection from this type of discovery tool, consider how finding aids and other tools are part of the archival ecosystem, and familiarize with the archival holdings available for access at NYUAD. However, most students hadn't completed this pre-class work, complicating the discussion and leaving limited time for questions due to the extensive material covered in the presentation. Additionally, much of the content that was covered regarding the background of the department and collecting areas was necessarily repeated in the second session by the Head of ASC, as a lead into collections he had selected for review. It was agreed that we would need to improve upon this first iteration and consider how best to split up the visits in the future.

The next opportunity to host The Digital Archive class was during the Fall 2022 semester. To meet the needs of a global student body who were returning to Abu Dhabi from countries all over the world with a range of variations in pandemic travel restrictions, this academic year began again as a hybrid remote/in-person structure. We organized the session in a similar manner as we had that previous spring: a (virtual) first session with Lauren, followed by an in-person visit to our department led by the Head of ASC. A few differences were built into the virtual session, on the heels of what we previously experienced. For instance, the exercise evaluating finding aids, initially intended as a pre-class task, was shifted to an in-class activity. Lauren conducted this activity on Zoom, where students were invited to interact with linked materials from her presentation slides. This was an opportunity to incorporate two new literacy objectives as well: (2B): "Be familiar with the most common ways primary sources are described, such as catalog records and archival finding aids," and (2C): "Distinguish between catalogs, databases, and other online resources that contain information about sources, versus those that contain digital versions, originals, or copies of the sources themselves." The finding aids selected for exploration included links to published finding

aids for ASC collections, as well as for a digital archive prepared and published through [Adam Matthew Explorer](#)[3], one of the 1200+ databases that NYU Libraries offers via authenticated access.

The same prompts for exploration from the initial flipped classroom activity were given for this in-class activity on Zoom, and the inclusion of a digital collection inside a subscription database opened up discussion around understanding the context of digital and digitized archives, ownership of records, and how to evaluate and understand different platforms of access. However, similar to what happened in the first iteration, we ran out of time to have a larger group discussion addressing some of the many thoughtful questions students had brought with them based on their syllabus readings and class themes.

As the course was offered for a third semester in Spring 2023, Suphan maintained the two-session week featuring ASC archivists in the syllabus, recognizing it as a highlight of the semester for the students based on their feedback to her. This was also the first full term at NYUAD with all classes in-person and without any country-wide restrictions. It offered Lauren a chance to reevaluate her session, influenced also partly by scheduling changes: the Head of ASC would now be teaching Session 1 to introduce the department and analog materials, so Lauren's preparatory session became redundant. Recognizing students' desire for more archivist-focused content and Q&A time, Lauren revised her class outline. She reduced the introduction and created a new, workshop-style activity named "You're The Archivist," allowing for more group discussion.

The "You're The Archivist '' exercise invited students, working together in small groups, to review a collection from the perspective of an archivist. In its initial iteration, the class was broken into three small groups, and Lauren assigned each group a specific collection from the University Archives to review, assess, and appraise. Students were instructed to draw on concepts that Lauren had just emphasized in her presentation (such as balancing the need for preservation and access, and the role of finding aids and metadata), as well as from their course readings.[4] For the assessment, they were asked to address the question: How could the collection be made more accessible, discoverable, or understandable? Each group was given ten minutes to review and talk with each other about the collection they were tasked to review and were provided whiteboards and markers

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[3] Adam Matthew Explorer. "Archives Direct: Sources from The National Archives, UK." December 29, 2023. https://www.archivesdirect.amdigital.co.uk/Introduction

[4] By the time of their visit to the Archives and Special Collections in week six of the semester, students will have already engaged extensively with scholarly literature that deepens their understanding of archival processes, digital repositories, ethical considerations, inclusivity, and access. Key readings include: Trevor Owens. "What Do You Mean by Archive? Genres of Usage for Digital Preservers" February 27, 2014. https://blogs.loc.gov/thesignal/2014/02/what-do-you-mean-by-archive-genres-of-usage-for-digital-preservers/; Joan M. Schwartz and Terry Cook, "Archives, Records and Power: The Making of Modern Memory," *Archival Science* 2 (2002): 1-19; Nora Caplan-Bricker, "Toward an Ethical Archive of the Web," *Harper's Magazine*, December 2018. https://harpers.org/archive/2018/12/preservation-acts-archiving-twitter-social-media-movements/ ; Terry Cook, "Evidence, Memory, Identity, and Community: Four Shifting Archival Paradigms," *Archival Science* 13 (2013): 95-120; and Adam Crymble, "The Archival Revisionism of Mass Digitization," in *Technology and the Historian: Transformations in the Digital Age*, 1st ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2021).

for note-taking and for organizing key points, to create a gallery-style ideas board. Following this, fifteen minutes were set aside for group reports and discussion.

The students engaged in the activity positively, showing particular enthusiasm for interacting with materials produced by previous student cohorts, whom they viewed as "historical figures" within their own institution. For example, one of the three collections included copies of early iterations of a student newspaper at NYUAD: the *NYUAD Times* and a later version, *The Fishbowl Tribune*. Students from the first group to work with these materials were excited to have access to topics and issues that their previous cohorts had been interested in, and were also curious about how the material was digitally created but not available online (the University Archives only holds the printouts and not the original digital files).

Taking into consideration the summer intensive semester, the fourth iteration of the Digital Archive class visit to ASC was one three-hour, workshop-style session led by Lauren that accommodated the summer schedule. Suphan and Lauren decided to build on the enthusiasm of the previous semester's students, as well as the longer class time, to revise the hands-on review and assessment exercise. The class included an introduction to the department and its collecting program, an overview of archivist work, a discussion on digital preservation, and a guided tour of the Library's Digitization Lab. This behind-the-scenes look at equipment and processes was a new addition not possible in previous semesters due to time constraints. Given the smaller class size in the summer, we focused more deeply on one collection as opposed to breaking out into groups of three, and that was the early student newspapers. Time was allotted for each student to review these early editions, and we held a discussion built around prompts about copyright, context, condition, and accessibility. We then also reserved time for the group to collaboratively image the pages, using their own devices. Students received simple handling instructions for the imaging task and could apply tips received from the earlier Digitization Lab tour. The three-hour session was tightly packed, with students completing the imaging just in time.

The Fall 2023 semester marked the fifth iteration of The Digital Archive class and an opportunity to apply lessons learned from past sessions in another week-long visit to ASC. This semester was notable for having the highest enrollment yet, with Suphan teaching two separate sections of the course. We followed the previous schedule of starting with a first session led by the Head of ASC during which students were introduced to the department and invited to engage individually with selected "analog" manuscript collections; followed by a session with Lauren to look at digital collections from the University Archives, which continued to include a brief presentation about what archivists do and the scope of the University Archives program, leading into the "You're The Archivist" exercise in small groups. This semester featured a few new collections, clearer instructions, and a discussion segment. This adaptation was influenced by the availability of finding aids for some newly opened University Archives collections and the insights from previous semesters, as detailed in the "Results" and "Lessons Learned" sections below.

Results

Beyond in-class discussion, the instructional activities at the ASC were assessed through student response papers, revealing how students interacted with and comprehended the archival resources (3B). The exposure to an array of records and primary sources led to an increased understanding

and appreciation of archival resources, as one student reflected, "It was a great and enlightening experience that pushes us as students to explore, critically analyze documents, and be aware of resources we otherwise wouldn't have known about." Several students, recognizing the academic value of these resources, incorporated ASC collections into their final projects.

The visits illuminated the selectivity and mediation inherent in archival practices, with students becoming aware of the factors influencing what is archived. One student observed, "Every collection and archival material present is there purposefully: chosen, acquired, and added to the ASC by the NYUAD archivists, with goal-oriented intention." Furthermore, students engaged critically with broader themes such as power dynamics and the balance between privacy and availability within archives.[5] They gained a holistic understanding of the archives, moving beyond viewing them as mere collections of historical or heritage documents.

The hands-on experience with physical archival materials underscored their uniqueness, as students noted that "Physical archival materials seem to hold a weight and sense of humanity that cannot be replicated or displayed within their online forms." This insight, coupled with the understanding of the epistemological gap between physical and digital archives, deepened their appreciation for the archival process.

A recurring theme in the students' responses was the complexity of archival processes. They gained a nuanced perspective on the challenges of accessibility in archiving, as highlighted in one student's reflection on the archivists' intent to make the University Archives "as open as possible, and restricted as necessary." This was complemented by the realization that not all materials in the ASC repository are digitized, emphasizing the importance of physical access for comprehensive research. Many students found value in both the physical presence within the archive and the digital exploration of its resources. As one student aptly summarized, "Both in-person visits and online research have their merits, serving different research needs and complementing each other."

During the digital sessions with Lauren, we observed how different class groups had different ideas or expectations about what "accessible" means for archival collections—for example, students of the third iteration (Spring 2023) vs the fifth iteration (Fall 2023). An interesting example happened during Spring 2023: one group was provided with a digital oral history collection via a laptop workstation that hosted the files, and were told that in addition to accessing the collection via the laptop they could utilize any external source as part of their evaluation of the collection's accessibility, including the ASC website (which had a link to the finding aid). However, even in the context of their readings and the presentation by archivists, it wasn't intuitive to that group of students to look for a finding aid, and the focus on accessibility led to a discussion of curating short clips for social media, and not on discoverability and access for doing research. This led Lauren to create and offer more direct instructions and provide direct links to the external sources during the fourth and fifth iterations of the exercise, rather than expect students—especially in just a short

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[5] For example, students by this time in the course have also read the following, bringing outside context into the class visit: Catherine D'Ignazio and Lauren Klein,"Data Science for Whom?", in Data Feminism, pp.32-39; Adele Perry, "The Colonial Archive on Trial" in Archive Stories, Fact, Fictions and The Writing of History, pp.325-35; Joan M. Schwartz and Terry Cook, "Archives, Records and Power: The Making of Modern Memory" pp.1-2; 13-15.

amount of time—to be investigators. This helped immensely in deepening the discussion and avoiding misunderstandings regarding how a user would discover and engage with the collection. "What makes a collection accessible" continued to provide interesting prompts during discussions. In another example, a group during the Fall 2023 visit reviewed one of our online collections—the undergraduate Capstone Archives—and remarked on how the load time of the papers (for some papers, up to one minute) made the collection less accessible than they would expect. Both Suphan and Lauren walk away from each class discussion with new insights into students' understandings and assumptions.

In their reviews, students not only answered Lauren's prompts asking them to assess how well the collections were discoverable, accessible, and understood, but also brought to the exercise their discussions and readings from the syllabus. Many students connected their review of online finding aids and metadata to their readings about "generous interfaces," inspired by Mitchell Whitelaw's 2015 article "Generous Interfaces for Digital Cultural Collections."[6] An assessment of discoverability and accessibility was also an assessment of how well archival tools employed at NYUAD fit within this framework, putting themselves not only in the shoes of an archivist, but also of an imagined user.

In conclusion, the NYUAD ASC experience has not only deepened students' understanding of archival research but also broadened their academic and societal perspectives. One student reflected, "Understanding the ethical dimensions of digital archives... enhances discussions about responsible research data handling." Another noted, "Learning ways to combat biases in the archive... can be applied to societal issues." Reflecting on the overall experience, a student remarked, "Visiting the NYUAD Archives and Special Collections in person was a unique and enriching experience." These insights reveal how archival studies not only deepen historical understanding but also offer valuable lessons for diverse fields and life experiences.

Lessons Learned

In our first semester, we learned that creating engaging experiences in a course about archives requires adaptability. We found that while flipped classroom activities have their place, they did not suit the ASC class visit due to varying levels of student preparation. To enhance engagement, we now ask students to review the ASC website and prepare two discussion questions for the archivists. This method not only increases their involvement but also leads to richer, more meaningful class interactions.

The "You're The Archivist" group exercise, introduced in Spring 2023, marked another significant improvement in student engagement. Merging content review with contextual analysis, this activity offers a dynamic learning experience. It also provides students with practical insights into technological evolution and obsolescence through interaction with various digital formats.

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[6] Whitelaw, Mitchell. "Generous Interfaces for Digital Cultural Collection." *Digital Humanities Quarterly,* Vol. 9, No. 1 (2015).
https://www.digitalhumanities.org/dhq/vol/9/1/000205/000205.html

Reflecting on the Summer 2023 class, which faced time constraints for the digitization activity, and acknowledging the ongoing challenge of limited time for Q&A and discussion in other semesters, we are updating our approach to address time limitations during class visits. Future courses will include an assignment for students to visit the ASC in smaller groups or individually, enabling focused work with Lauren on selected collections. Students will receive detailed guidance on the collections, as well as relevant digitization tools and methods, prior to these visits. This strategy aims to deepen the discussions with the archivists while also enhancing practical digital skills.

The evolution in our teaching approach underscores a key insight: students respond more positively to active engagement, hands-on activities, and ample opportunities for inquiry, which invariably lead to more meaningful and enriching educational experiences.