

CASE #10

# Utilizing University Archives to Teach Students the Complexities of Neutrality

AUTHOR

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Baltimore County[edurham@umbc.edu](mailto:edurham@umbc.edu)*(Formerly Teaching and Outreach Graduate  
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University of Maryland, College Park)*LEARNING OBJECTIVES ENGAGED FROM [GUIDELINES FOR PRIMARY SOURCE LITERACY](#) BY THIS CASE STUDY

- 2.A. Identify the possible locations of primary sources.
- 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.
- 4.B. Critically evaluate the perspective of the creator(s) of a primary source, including tone, subjectivity, and biases, and consider how they relate to the original purpose(s) and audience(s) of the source.
- 4.C. 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.
- 4.F. Demonstrate historical empathy, curiosity about the past, and appreciation for historical sources and historical actors.

CASE STUDY LOCATION

University of Maryland  
Special Collections and University Archives, Hornbake Library  
College Park, Maryland  
<https://spec.lib.vt.edu/>

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## Introduction and Institutional Context

The Instruction and Outreach unit of Special Collections and University Archives (SCUA), the location of this case study, is located in the Hornbake Library at the University of Maryland, College Park (UMD) in College Park, Maryland. The university was founded in 1856 and has approximately 40,000 students. In 2018 the Instruction and Outreach unit was staffed by two full-time professional librarians and student workers. Special Collections and University Archives holds 274,925 cataloged volumes, 85,765 linear feet of archival materials, and 168,193 audio/visual materials. The education program teaches primary source literacy to promote the use of the collections for quantitative and qualitative research. During our instruction sessions we encourage students to do the following:

- Consider the reasons for silences, contradictions, and power relationships within archival collections and articulate how these may impact both the value of the source and the archival research process.
- Think about the possible limitations of archival research, which includes understanding that records may not exist or be publicly available, and that the creation, organization, and survival of, and access to archival collections is mediated by human actors.
- Recognize that archival research is an iterative process that includes defining an information need within a historical or cultural context, initiating and refining a search strategy, and seeking alternative points of view on a topic.

While the Instruction and Outreach unit consists of the Instruction and Outreach Coordinator and the Special Collections Librarian for Teaching and Learning, the department facilitates a community of practice for its education program, with various staff members both leading and supporting instruction sessions for classes from many disciplines. This case study offers a unique perspective on developing instructional materials to support a course that focuses on “theoretical and empirical work in comparative politics.” Archival collections provide the historical and cultural context to help students understand the development and impact of various social movement movements of the 20th and 21st century. In this study we examine the process of developing a lesson plan and active learning activities, curating a teaching collection, and using critical reflection for assessment. The thirty-student class was co-taught by two instructors, Ashleigh Coren, formerly Special Collections Librarian for Teaching and Learning, and Erin Durham, formerly a Graduate Assistant from UMD’s Teaching and Learning Services department.

In early spring 2018, the unit received an instruction request via email to teach primary source analysis for an upper-level Government and Politics class of twenty students titled Seminar in Comparative Politics: Social Movements. Students in this class study the development of international social movements and the outcomes that they produce. Our collection documenting campus unrest at the University of Maryland during the Vietnam War era was a great fit for this class. The materials demonstrate the intersectional politics of student activism both on-campus and within the state of Maryland. Materials from this collection include newspapers, photographs, reports from facilities management, and ephemera from student organizations. After an initial discussion, the professor was open to different forms of engagement from our menu of services.<sup>1</sup> Ultimately, Coren and Durham decided to develop an instruction session with a short presentation and two separate

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<sup>1</sup> See the Menu of Services on the Instruction and Tours section of the SCUA website, <https://www.lib.umd.edu/special/outreach/home>.

activities: a document analysis worksheet and a discovery activity using our finding aid database on our iPads.

During the planning sessions, the instructors discussed learning outcomes for the students in the session. Specifically, the instructors were interested in helping students understand that archival research is iterative, and that archival materials are not objective or neutral. After teaching the session, Durham and Coren identified four learning objectives from the *Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy*<sup>2</sup> to guide their assessment of student responses. They used the following objectives to evaluate the extent to which the students were able to:

- 2.A. Identify the possible locations of primary sources.
- 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.
- 4.B. 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.
- 4.F. Demonstrate historical empathy, curiosity about the past, and appreciation for historical sources and historical actors.

## Narrative

After receiving the request for the Government and Politics instruction session, Coren scheduled the session in early April to align with a course unit on student movements. Coren and Durham then met several times over the course of the semester to plan, prepare, and teach the class, and afterward to assess student learning. One of the challenges the instructors discussed early on was the importance of balancing practical skills with a discussion of critical issues in archival practice, such as interrogating the notion of neutrality and objectivity. With these priorities in mind, the instructors planned a lesson that would introduce students to critical archival practice, as well as engage them in primary source discovery and analysis of their own.

The instruction session was organized into three parts: a fifteen-minute lecture, two twenty-minute activities, and a twenty-minute debriefing for discussion and questions. Coren prepared a slide presentation that introduced the concept of primary source literacy and shared general information about SCUA's collecting areas.<sup>3</sup> Using archival photographs of 1960s and 1970s campus life, she also prepared to introduce students to the historical context of the Vietnam-era protests at UMD. In order to help students develop practical archival skills, Durham developed the Discovery Activity (see Appendix 1), in which students were grouped together in teams and given the challenge to find archival records relating to a specific primary source object. For the final activity, students were also grouped in small teams and asked to analyze the primary source object using a Primary Source Analysis worksheet (see Appendix 2) that had been developed and used previously in SCUA teaching. The worksheet questions were designed to lead students through the process of historical inquiry and evaluation, as well as engage them in critical reflection about archives as non-neutral spaces.

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<sup>2</sup> SAA-ACRL/RBMS Joint Task Force on the Development of Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy, *Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy*, <https://www2.archivists.org/standards/guidelines-for-primary-source-literacy>.

<sup>3</sup> See information about SCUA collections on the About Us section of the website, <https://www.lib.umd.edu/special/about/home>.

On the day of the class visit, the instructors arrived early to set up the classroom and talk through the session. They arranged the tables and chairs into six groupings of about five students each, to encourage small group participation and discussion. Once the students arrived and were settled at the tables, Coren and Durham welcomed them and discussed how they would be examining archival documents relating to local student protests on campus during the 1960s and 1970s. Coren then used her slides to present concepts from the Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy, and showed photographs of student life as it existed on the UMD campus during that time period. Many students seemed surprised to learn about the campus curfews and codes of behavior that were quite strict in comparison to contemporary UMD policies. In the 1960s, the conservative campus was rocked by student protests. As Coren showed photographs of students barricading an academic building and protesting the Vietnam War on the mall, students in the session seemed deeply interested in learning about these event, and asked several questions.

Following the presentation on historical context, Durham discussed the online collections and discovery tools that students could use to research the archival holdings further. She transitioned into the Discovery Activity (Appendix 1) by passing out the scenario to the small groups of students seated around each table. The case study required students to select one of the archival objects on their table and find its item record using Special Collections' online resources. Students were given iPads with internet access and encouraged to use a range of finding tools, including the online archival catalogue and the special collections finding aids.<sup>4</sup> As Durham and Coren walked around to the different student teams to provide support and assistance, they noted how some students seemed to want a checklist of instructions. During the sharing portion of the instruction session, three students volunteered to demonstrate their team's research process in front of the class. The first student to demonstrate shared the way the team ultimately navigated to the online record of the item, but the two other representatives explained that they were not able to locate the item online. It was evident from the class demonstration that the discovery process was a challenge for most of the students, illuminating the need for more extensive discovery support in future instruction sections. One of the major takeaways was the need to help students understand the iterative nature of research, as many seemed uncomfortable or unwilling to try a variety of discovery tools and approaches.

With the students still arranged in their groups, Coren introduced the archival analysis activity. She passed out Primary Source Analysis worksheets (Appendix 2) to each student in the class and asked them to carefully analyze the primary source object their team had identified during the previous discovery exercise. As Coren and Durham walked around to work with groups of students, they observed a range of student involvement. While some students were less engaged, several students were deeply invested in finding out details about their objects and willingly shared their findings in the final class discussion. A few students discovered a personal connection to their primary source of study. As the session wrapped up, the Government and Politics professor emphasized the importance of the archives and encouraged her students to consider using the archival collections for one of their course assignments.

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<sup>4</sup> "Archives UM," <https://wayback.archive-it.org/2410/20161230035953/http://digital.lib.umd.edu/archivesum/index.jsp>. In the intervening time since this class, SCUA has implemented an ArchivesSpace-based finding aid searching tool.

## Results

Coren and Durham held a debriefing session immediately following the class and an assessment meeting one week later. They employed critical reflection<sup>5</sup> in their assessment of student engagement in the classroom and evaluation of individual student worksheet responses from the archival analysis activity, which were collected at the end of the class session. Both the observations of student participation and the student worksheet responses were evaluated for evidence of student understanding of the selected learning objectives, namely that archival research is iterative in nature, and that archival materials are not neutral and should be understood within their historical context.

Critical engagement with archival collections is immediately relevant to primary source literacy and requires a skillset beyond a simple checklist approach to information seeking. The iterative nature of searching and the nuanced nature of information is indicated within the learning objectives of the Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy. The language of objective 4.B states that students should be able to “critically evaluate the perspective of the creator(s) of a primary source, including tone, subjectivity, and biases.” This guideline assumes that all primary sources display bias, rather than only certain ones, thus it is not of matter of whether or not a source is biased, but rather a question of the ways in which it reveals the creator’s perspective and worldview. Whether students are evaluating a gas mask from an archival collection, a contemporary blog post from the internet, or a scholarly peer-reviewed article from a top journal publication, it is important to consider the ways in which information is never neutral and unbiased, and is always subject to careful and critical evaluation.

During their debriefing and assessment meeting, Coren and Durham referenced the level of student participation and engagement as one evidence of student learning. Many students who attended the session seemed very comfortable participating in the activities and asking questions. During Coren’s presentation on the historical context of the student protests on campus, several students asked specific questions. The class seemed especially attentive and engaged as archival photographs were shared of campus life and protests in the 1960s and 1970s, and many students were willing to discuss their primary source objects. Several student worksheets exhibited detailed and thoughtful analysis, which demonstrated that a number of students were able to effectively “identify and communicate information found in primary sources” (objective 3.B.).

The reluctance of some students to engage in searches for historical context indicates the need to include an even greater emphasis on the iterative and ambiguous nature of historical research. While the lesson was designed specifically to encourage students to explore many methods and means of discovering historical background information, it was clear that some students were more comfortable with ambiguity than others. The assessment indicated that only part of the class was able to successfully locate archival materials (objective 2.A.) and fully engage with research as an iterative process. In the future, it may be useful to select and analyze one primary source object together as a group in order to model the ambiguous and iterative aspects of historical research. This class activity could then set the tone for the smaller group discovery and archival analysis activities during the remainder of the session.

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<sup>5</sup> For a succinct summary of the use of critical reflection in teaching see Natasha Kenny, “The What? So What? and Now What? of Critical Reflection,” <http://connections.ucalgaryblogs.ca/2014/07/30/the-what-so-what-and-now-what-of-critical-reflection/>.

Coren and Durham also noted that while the class overall evidenced high levels of participation, there were a few individuals and groups of students who seemed reluctant to engage with their primary source objects during both the discovery and archival analysis activities. Interestingly, the level of engagement did not seem connected in any way to the relative uniqueness of their primary source objects. For example, one student poured intently over a single newspaper article for the entire portion of the activity, while another group only made only half-hearted efforts to explore the historical background and provenance of a gas mask used by a student attending UMD in the 1960s. This was an unexpected result, as the instructors had specially identified the gas mask as an object they thought would provoke particular curiosity and investigation. In addition, secondary source information was quite easily available on the gas mask if the students had tried a simple Google search (which they did not). Sophisticated historical analysis and inquiry are skills and dispositions that can be developed, as indicated by their deliberate inclusion within the *Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy* (in particular, objectives 3.B. and 4.B.). Historical analysis is a skill that requires the willingness of students to explore, but can also be improved through more careful framing of the class instruction and activities.

In addition to the difficulty students had in understanding research as an iterative process, it was evident that the majority students held a false understanding of archival documents as “objective sources.” The final question on the Primary Source Analysis worksheet directly addressed the concept of archival neutrality, and as the instructors read the student responses they noted that the majority of students struggled to explain their reasoning as to whether a source was objective or not. Between a fourth and a third of the students seemed to think that objectivity was desirable. Some students seemed to feel the need to claim objectivity as an authoritative characteristic. One student described a 1969 flyer from “concerned black citizens” regarding the murder of a black man by county police. When responding to the final question on point of view and objectivity, the student wrote, “The point of view being shared is that of the victims. It is an objective source because the facts are listed about the murder. However, there are some subjective aspects to the newsletter.” This response presents a fascinating look into the understanding of this student, who clearly saw the value of the document and yet perhaps did not realize that objectivity is not a desirable (or accurate) characteristic of primary source documents. Many students did not seem to understand that neutrality does not exist in the archives, nor is the label of objectivity required to make a source more authoritative or valuable.

Nearly half of the students identified their sources as “not objective” in their worksheet responses. It is interesting to see the range of responses and the reasons students gave as to why their items were not objective sources. Two students pointed to heightened emotional response as evidence of a source’s non-neutrality. One of these students wrote, “This is not an objective source, it is full of emotion.” Other students referred to first-hand involvement in 1960s policies and protest as evidence that the source was not objective.

In total, four students identified their sources as non-objective and also considered this to be a positive characteristic of the source. When describing a newsletter from the Students for a Democratic Society, one student wrote, “not objective source, but interesting to get the point of view from the students.” Two students who also examined the 1969 flyer protesting police brutality recognized that it was not an “objective” source, but argued that it had value due to first-hand involvement. One of these students wrote, “It might not be objective as it is clearly influenced by

anger and emotion stemming from an event they viewed as unjust. However, this does not mean they aren't valid in their feelings and thoughts."

The student responses to the question of primary source objectivity revealed that the majority of students did not have a clear understanding that objectivity does not exist in an archive; rather they seemed to view neutrality as a desirable and authoritative trait. In summary, about a third of the students did not directly answer the question as to whether their source was objective or not, another third described their item as an "objective" source, and ten responded that their source was "non-objective." Of these final ten, it is fascinating to note that only four students described their "non-objective" sources in positive terms. While Coren and Durham had prioritized the concept of non-neutrality in both the lesson planning and class presentation, the worksheet responses indicated the need to devote more time to critical discussions of the concept of neutrality. In addition to holding critical class discussions and sharing examples, it would be important to frame the final question on the worksheet in a way that welcomed critical, non-binary responses as well.

It should be noted that an unanticipated, but very welcome outcome of the session emerged as students shared personal connections they made in the course of the session. During the archival analysis activity, a few students shared their personal connection to the primary source object that they analyzed. For example, one student was energized by the realization that events documented in his primary source item took place in the building where he currently works on campus. Another student shared how a 1960s campus newspaper describing racial discrimination in the student admission process related on a personal level with her own family history. She described her grandmother's disappointment of not being admitted to UMD as a young adult, and she made the connection for the first time that her grandmother was likely disadvantaged by the university's racially discriminatory policies during the mid-twentieth century.

Such shared personal connections had not been anticipated by the instructors. These outcomes indicate the presence of historical empathy as articulated in learning outcome 4.F. from the Guidelines, which highlights students' ability to "demonstrate historical empathy, curiosity about the past, and appreciation for historical sources and historical actors." While such personal connections cannot be guaranteed (or even planned for), the nature of archival materials and local history has the potential to invite personal application and connection, allowing for deeper learning and engagement. Deep learning takes place when students make a personal connection and can apply their learning to their everyday experience. Working with primary source materials has the potential to help students make tangible connections to the past through their own personal lived experiences, which cultivates both thoughtful historical analysis and deeper learning.

## **Lessons Learned**

While the professor characterized the session as "fun and informative," during the assessment process Coren and Durham reflected on how primary source literacy helps students to apply the theories from their class to local and national historic events. The student worksheets were valuable in helping the instructors measure success to a degree, but also demonstrated the difficulty of teaching the concept of neutrality and introducing students to archival research and discovery techniques in a 75-minute session. The responses from the worksheets revealed the need to include more class time to teach students how to navigate the SCUA website and basic keyword searching techniques. For future iterations of the discovery activity the instructors plan to ask students detailed questions about their search process and how they recuperate from failed searches. The final

question on the worksheet, “Now that you’ve thought a bit about the object, whose point of view is being shared? Is this an objective source?” should be rewritten to ask students to think about specific points of view missing from their source and to share their own feelings about the item. Additionally, we recognized the importance of pulling objects for the class session that are easy to locate online using layman’s terms. The instructors spent most of the discovery activity helping students navigate the website, which allowed less time for students to complete the worksheet.

The instructors also made the decision to start future sessions for this class with an informal assessment of the students’ knowledge and familiarity with archival sources and the Vietnam War era. What are their perceptions of student activism in the 1960s and ’70s? The class session should also conclude with a discussion asking students if they feel differently about student activism and their understanding of university history. There was also a missed opportunity to connect the history of student movements on campus to contemporary examples—like the Ferguson, Missouri, and Baltimore, Maryland, uprisings in 2014 and 2015, or on-campus protests for LGBTQ rights—to create a more personal connection to the materials.

In fall 2018 the class returned for a repeat session, and the current instructors incorporated changes for the discovery activity. Coren worked with new graduate assistants to edit the questions on the archival analysis worksheet to encourage students to think about missing voices in the collection. The discovery activity was morphed into a ten-minute general introduction and demonstration on how to use our new finding aid database, ArchivesSpace,<sup>6</sup> which provided more time for discussion and questions at the end of the session. Student responses from the worksheets presented a more nuanced exploration into objectivity. One student remarked that “the point of view is exclusively from the perspective of white students” and another commented “that this [particular] source is more anecdotal than it is objective.” Overall the comments demonstrated greater critical engagement with the objects, and increased understanding of the concepts of primary source literacy. In spring 2019 two graduate assistants in SCUA co-taught the same session while being observed by Coren. The partnership between special collections and the Government and Politics department is especially valuable because it allows the Instruction and Outreach unit to think about new ways to teach primary source literacy and expand the critical thinking for students using our collections for research.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://archives.lib.umd.edu/>.



## Appendix 1: Discovery Activity Handout

### Archives Treasure Hunting

Using the archival item that you selected as a group, prepare to give a brief class demonstration of how you can find the item record using University of Maryland Special Collections online resources. Feel free to explore resources such as:

- Archives UM <https://digital.lib.umd.edu/archivesum/>
- University AlbUM <https://digital.lib.umd.edu/album>
- Guide to Vietnam-Era Protests <https://digital.lib.umd.edu/archivesum/rguide/viet.jsp>
- . . . and others!

Once you have located a record of the item online, discuss what your next steps would be to request the item through the Archives Aeon system. Be prepared to share a brief 1-minute demonstration with the class sharing what you discovered and how they can find the item record through UMD archives.

## Appendix 2: Primary Source Analysis Worksheet

### Primary Source Analysis

Describe one of the objects on the table in a few sentences. (Type, date, and anything interesting you see.)

Who is the author or creator, and why was the document created?

Where do you think this document comes from and how did it end up in our archives?

After analyzing the object, use the iPads to look up any names, events, or words that are unfamiliar to you. List them below.

Now that you've thought a bit about the object, whose point of view is being shared? Is this an objective source?