

CASE #1

# Collaborating for Impact in Teaching Primary Source Literacy

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES ENGAGED BY THIS CASE STUDY

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.

3.A. Examine a primary source, which may require the ability to read a particular script, font, or language, to understand or operate a particular technology, or to comprehend vocabulary, syntax, and communication norms of the time period and location where the source was created.

5.A. Examine and synthesize a variety of sources in order to construct, support, or dispute a research argument.

LOCATION OF CASE STUDY

Augustana College Special Collections

Rock Island, Illinois

<http://www.augustana.edu/library/special-collections>

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## Introduction and Institutional Context

Special Collections is a department of the Thomas Tredway Library of Augustana College, located in Rock Island, Illinois. Augustana College, an all-undergraduate liberal arts college, was founded in 1860 and has approximately 2,500 currently enrolled students. During the academic year, the department is staffed by one full-time professional librarian, one part-time paraprofessional staff person, and several student workers. The primary mission of Special Collections is to collect, preserve, and make available materials that serve the teaching and research needs of Augustana College and the local community. Special Collections holds approximately 20,000 printed volumes, 2,500 linear feet of archival materials in just over 400 collections, approximately 60,000 local and college images, and approximately 1,300 video and sound recordings. Subject areas covered encompass a wide range of topics, but major holdings comprise the history of Augustana College, Rock Island, the Quad Cities area, and the Upper Mississippi River Valley.

Special Collections supports the teaching and research programs of the college and views itself as the campus laboratory for the humanities. To that end, the special collections librarian conducts instruction sessions for a wide range of classes, from first-year Liberal Studies classes to Senior Inquiry seminars, and in a wide variety of disciplines, including English, history, women's and gender studies, art history, anthropology, and geography. On average, 50–60 instruction sessions are offered in Special Collections each year, which involve approximately 25% of the Augustana student body. Sessions always include hands-on use of Special Collections materials, active learning exercises with primary sources, and introductions to basic concepts in archival literacy, visual literacy, and information literacy. Instruction sessions are planned in consultation with the course instructor, nearly always in support of an assignment requiring intensive use of Special Collections materials, and sometimes involving a scaffolded or embedded model of instruction encompassing two or more class sessions of 75–110 minutes each.

At Augustana College, information literacy is part of the campus culture; in fact, it is paired with critical thinking as one of nine college-wide student learning outcomes. The Special Collections instruction program is integrated in both the Augustana College curriculum and the Tredway Library information literacy program. The library follows a scaffolded program of information literacy instruction, beginning with the college's first-year inquiry (FYI) sequence. Instruction takes place in a series of course-integrated sessions (usually at least five sessions over the course of the first year) that teach to specific outcomes and provide foundational information literacy skills. Many course instructors choose to incorporate Special Collections instruction into

this sequence, often utilizing collaborative sessions with research and instruction librarians. After the first year, liaison librarians and the special collections librarian work with departments to offer scaffolded disciplinary information literacy instruction incorporating a series of information literacy program outcomes, which were developed by librarians and mapped to the college's student learning outcomes and the *ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*.<sup>1</sup>

This case study will discuss a collaboration between the special collections librarian, the research and instruction librarian and liaison to the History Department, and a faculty member in the History Department supporting a course entitled *HIST200: Gateway: Research*. HIST200 is designed to be taken by history majors and minors as a prerequisite to upper-level courses in the department. The course introduces students to basic skills and methods of historical research and historiography, including locating, analyzing, and interpreting primary sources. The course is offered annually on a particular overarching theme established by the instructor, which changes from year to year.

This case study relates to the section of the course taught in the winter 2015–2016 term, which dealt with the question “Does the Midwest have a distinct regional history?” In support of their research, students came to the library for two instruction sessions: the first with the special collections librarian, and the second with the research and instruction librarian. In planning these sessions, the instructors’ primary objective was to encourage students to become more comfortable with the process of utilizing primary sources, contextualizing them with secondary scholarship, and synthesizing this information in their own unique research. From the beginning, the primary learning outcome for these sessions was the *Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy* learning objective 5.A.; however, due to students’ likely unfamiliarity with primary source research, the instructors (particularly the special collections librarian) believed it was also important to focus on learning objectives 2.B. and 3.A.

## **Narrative**

This iteration of HIST200 challenged students to critically interrogate what the Midwest is and to attempt to determine whether or not the region has its own distinct history. Since students in the course would be heavily utilizing both the library and Special Collections throughout the term, it was important to both librarians (and the faculty member) to be involved in the planning process. Prior to the beginning of the term, the special collections librarian, research

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<sup>1</sup> “Tredway Library Information Literacy Program Outcomes,” last modified May 2016, <http://augustana.net/Documents/Library/Tredway%20IL%20outcomes%20map.pdf>.

and instruction librarian, and faculty member met together and worked over email to plan the goals for the course. The faculty member had not yet finalized the syllabus for the course, and used input from both librarians to solidify the course calendar according to his overarching goals. All three instructors had worked closely together before, and the faculty member has consistently demonstrated a strong belief in the value of both Special Collections and information literacy instruction, so the planning process went very smoothly, and both librarians had the opportunity to incorporate their own ideas and pedagogical approaches into the course. All three instructors were present during the two instruction sessions that ultimately resulted from this planning, with the exception of the second session, which the faculty member had to miss due to an emergency.

Over the course of the ten-week term, students completed a substantial course-long research assignment grounded in primary source analysis and culminating in a fifteen-page research paper based on their own unique research. The first component of the course was a four-to-six-page paper based on an intensive analysis of a single primary source held in Special Collections. The class came in for an instruction session in Special Collections at the beginning of the second week of the course to learn how to analyze and locate sources, explore a sampling of Special Collections materials related to the course topic, and begin selecting their individual sources.

The instruction session began with a brief (ten-minute) orientation to Special Collections, including an overview of materials held, instructions for careful handling, information on how to request materials, and a general introduction to relevant policies. The special collections librarian then guided the class through the process of analyzing a pre-selected source as a group: a 1919 photograph of Augustana's R.O.T.C. canteen in the (long-since demolished) campus gym (see Appendix 1). With the special collections librarian's help, the class talked through the photograph, considering questions like: *When was this source created? Who are the people in the photograph? How does the writing on the photograph help you better understand it? What is a canteen, and what does the term "R.O.T.C." suggest? What specific evidence do you see in the photograph to support your answers to these questions? What other kinds of sources or information would you seek to confirm these conclusions?* In response to the final question, the students (guided by the special collections librarian) then explored some departmental databases and search strategies to learn how to find information to contextualize their analysis of the source. The special collections librarian demonstrated and/or performed keyword searches in the library's database of digitized student newspapers and yearbooks, in ArchivesSpace, in the library catalog, and in Special Collections' online exhibits and digital projects, all while students followed along on their own laptops. In the second half of the session, students worked individually to analyze a primary source pre-selected by the special

collections librarian. Materials pulled for the session were at once regionally specific and intrinsically linked to national events and trends; students examined sources related to the American Nazi Party in Iowa, Illinois Civil War soldiers, local prohibition groups, and immigrants' guides. The final fifteen minutes of the class were dedicated to a group report-out of the students' analyses of the sources.

One week later, the class returned to the library for an instruction session with the research and instruction librarian. In this session, the class revisited the canteen photograph to brainstorm search strategies for locating secondary scholarship to contextualize their work on this unique source. Students (guided by the research and instruction librarian) discussed ways to construct search queries, considering the dangers of both performing too broad a search (e.g., *World War, 1914-1918*) and focusing too narrowly (e.g., *World War, 1914-1918 AND R.O.T.C. AND canteens*). Students were then given time to start searching for secondary scholarship to contextualize the sources they examined in Special Collections. Students were individually assisted by both the research and instruction librarian and the special collections librarian during this time.

## Results

The success of the sessions was gauged in several ways, though most data was only gathered informally. Students were provided with brief surveys at the end of the Special Collections instruction session asking them what they still found confusing about the archival research process and what they encountered during the session that they would like to learn more about. These responses were recorded and analyzed (see Appendix 2). Some students expressed discomfort with the overall process of synthesizing a variety of sources; two students wanted to learn more about finding primary sources in other databases outside Special Collections, and one student specifically mentioned "making connections" between sources as being a struggle.

Students also completed worksheets with questions about the sources they analyzed individually (see Appendix 3). An informal analysis of their responses on the worksheets revealed that most were capable of conducting a basic (and in some cases, advanced) analysis of a single primary source. However, most students struggled to envision how to expand their research beyond the resources in their immediate reach. When asked where they might seek more information to contextualize the source or the topic it discussed, two-thirds of the students specifically mentioned using other primary sources in Special Collections. This issue was confirmed in anecdotal observations during both sessions. When asked specific questions

about the primary sources they examined, each of the students could readily provide answers; however, during the instruction session with the research and instruction librarian, many students became noticeably flustered when asked what keywords they might search or what databases they might use to locate secondary information on their topics. Inevitably, several of them responded that they would just give up and try to find additional related primary sources.

## **Lessons Learned**

Overall, the joint instructional unit was successful, with some room for improvement. By the end of the Special Collections instruction session and the primary source analysis assignment, students were able to perform a satisfactory analysis of a single primary source, meeting most or all of the detailed requirements of objective 3.A. This was likely equally attributable to both detailed guidance from the course instructor in the assignment rubric and the various in-class exercises designed to train students on primary source analysis during the Special Collections instruction session itself. Both during the primary source analysis phase of the course and while writing their final research papers, students also demonstrated proficiency with searching for primary sources (objective 2.B.). The instruction session included a guided walkthrough of the various search utilities and databases available in Special Collections, which students then used to locate resources pertinent to their selected topics. Somewhat surprisingly, a significant portion of the class chose to seek resources outside Special Collections and were able to apply the search strategies learned during the instruction session to the library's subscription databases, aggregators like the Digital Public Library of America and ArchiveGrid, online archival and newspaper collections, and other web utilities to find information on their topics.

The main learning objective targeted in this instructional unit was 5.A., which involves synthesizing a variety of sources to construct a research argument. When planning the sessions, all three instructors rightly supposed that this objective would be the one with which students would struggle the most. While students did demonstrate some success in this area after the sessions, the instructors believed there was room for improvement. The research and instruction librarian noted that students particularly struggled with the concept of contextualizing a primary source with secondary scholarship when writing on a totally unique topic. Students inevitably attempted to search too narrowly, or too broadly, for secondary sources related to their topics. When presented with the problem of finding no existing scholarship on the exact topic they were researching, most students wanted to simply seek out additional primary sources, rather than re-frame their research question or search strategies. From this exercise, the instructors realized that students clearly need additional guidance to take what they find in Special Collections and make meaning from it in a larger scholarly

conversation. The research and instruction librarian hopes to frame her future work with this class within the context of the *ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*, with a close eye to the knowledge practices and dispositions within the *Scholarship as Conversation* and *Research as Inquiry* frames.

The faculty member teaching the course thought the instruction sessions were greatly beneficial for students and was happy with the way they were conducted, but did acknowledge that more work could be done to better hone students' skills with objective 5.A. In the faculty member's opinion, students' greatest obstacle (not just in this class, but across the the history curriculum) is learning to treat research as an iterative process, using evidence from a variety of sources to create a true conversation on a particular topic, rather than just regurgitating facts and arguments. Undergraduates struggle to envision how they, as researchers, should form some kind of unique construction from existing literature based on a particular topic. In HIST200, this issue was manifested in students' difficulty using secondary sources to activate primary sources in a meaningful way. The faculty member noted that in their final papers, students tended to use secondary scholarship as background information on the primary sources they selected, or to simply assess the facts contained within the primary sources, rather than teasing out the authors' arguments or conclusions to incorporate into their own research. Students tend to conceive of secondary sources as tools to determine the validity of primary sources, and nothing more. To address this issue, the faculty member would like future collaborations to include focused one-on-one research appointments with both the special collections librarian and the research and instruction librarian. While time consuming, this would force students to think more intentionally about these issues early on in their career as historians.

The special collections librarian, taking into account the issues noted by her collaborators, hopes to improve the execution of the Special Collections instruction session to focus more intently on objective 5.A. rather than 3.A. or 2.B., both of which were too heavily stressed during the instruction session in retrospect. The original focus on 5.A. was lost in the execution of the session due to the special collections librarian's concern about students having a good foundation of exposure to primary sources on which to build. Students seem to be able to grasp the basic elements of primary source analysis and manage the process of searching for materials without a great deal of intervention on the part of Special Collections staff, but they continue to struggle with determining how to effectively use that information. In order to address the concerns of both the faculty member and the research and instruction librarian, class time during the Special Collections instruction session could be better spent on an activity demonstrating the iterative nature of archival research-- for instance, an exercise prompting

students to track back to archival collections cited in footnotes of scholarly articles, or a worksheet deliberately encouraging them to put a primary source and a secondary source into conversation with one another. Both instruction sessions could also be improved by building in a better model of assessment. The current model (anecdotal observations and student self-surveys) does not provide a quantitative measure of student learning or information retention. The sessions would benefit from some kind of summative assessment (e.g. a pre- and post-test, or grading students' final papers against a rubric developed by the librarians) to better determine impact.

All three instructors are highly supportive of collaborative teaching between archivists, subject librarians, and faculty members in an undergraduate setting. Not only does seeing all three bodies together in the classroom drive home the point for students that no single lesson or instructional moment exists in a vacuum (which is a particularly relevant point in libraries, where instruction sessions can sometimes be written off as time fillers by both students and faculty members), but observing students learning in three different environments is very telling to those instructors who only ever encounter students in their own sphere. For instance, the special collections librarian discovered that focusing her instruction and reference work solely on the problems students encounter in the reading room could actually be a detriment to some students who would benefit from help with the “bigger picture” of research. Too often, special collections librarians and archivists put all their efforts into connecting students to relevant documents, helping them interpret the documents if necessary, and then unquestioningly sending them on their way, never realizing that the real roadblocks to conducting effective primary source research often present themselves *outside* the reading room. The *Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy* serve to illustrate that primary source literacy is a metaliteracy, incorporating elements of traditional information literacy, visual literacy, archival literacy, etc. Crafting special collections instruction that touches on all these points can be both daunting and impracticable, but this case illustrates that bringing in partners to collaborate on effectively teaching with primary sources makes the task of encouraging primary source literacy seem more manageable for all parties involved.

Appendix 1: Image Used for Class Discussion



**Figure 1:** R.O.T.C. Canteen in Old Gymnasium, 1919 (image C-L255), Special Collections, Augustana College, Rock Island, Illinois.

## Appendix 2: Survey Responses

Timestamp	Course Number	Course Title	What about Special Collections do you still find confusing?	What did you see or hear about today that you'd like to learn more about?
11/23/2015 14:33:52	HIST 200	Gateway: Research	Other links for websites or the databases could be used	Getting sources out to see
11/23/2015 14:34:14	HIST 200	Gateway: Research	[No response given]	The Great Flood of 1965
11/23/2015 14:35:05	HIST 200	Gateway: Research	Other website links for Special Collections and data research for primary sources	Augie Observer on library page
11/23/2015 14:35:41	HIST 200	Gateway: Research	[No response given]	I think the murder of George Davenport sounded kinda cool.
11/23/2015 14:37:51	HIST 200	Gateway: Research	Ok, this is stupid, but would I be able to get up and get a drink from my water bottle in my cubby while I'm down here or would I have to leave the room for that?	You mentioned something that made me wonder if my family's records would be here since I'm third generation in my family to attend Augustana.
11/23/2015 14:38:21	HIST 200	Gateway: Research	Finding material in the mass folders and containers	Camp McClellan
11/23/2015 14:38:45	HIST 200	Gateway: Research	[No response given]	How many things are back in Special Collections
11/23/2015 14:39:28	HIST 200	Gateway: Research	I wish I had more time to understand the context in which these articles were written	[No response given]
11/23/2015 14:39:52	HIST 200	Gateway: Research	The process of connecting things	Prohibition
11/23/2015 14:40:13	HIST 200	Gateway: Research	[No response given]	How you get all of these sources

## Appendix 3: Primary Source Analysis Worksheet

### Document Analysis Exercise: HIST 200

Identify the item sitting in front of you. Include as much information about it as you can, including title, format, publication or creation date, who created it, etc.

What is the topic of the item?

For what purpose do you think the item was created?

How does this item represent a uniquely Midwestern aspect of history?

How does this item fit into a broader trend or theme in American history?

If you wanted to find out more information about this item or the topics it discusses, what would be your first step?

Write a question left unanswered by the item, or that the information in the item raises for you.