

CASE #5

Exploring Ephemerality, Biases, and Silences in Archives

AUTHORS

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES ENGAGED BY THIS CASE STUDY

2D. 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.

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.

LOCATION OF CASE STUDY University Archives, Seeley G. Mudd Library

Lawrence University

Appleton, Wisconsin

<https://www.lawrence.edu/library>

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Introduction and Institutional Context

Lawrence University (LU) is a small liberal arts college and conservatory of music in Appleton, Wisconsin, with 1500 undergraduates enrolled. Located in the Seeley G. Mudd Library on campus, the LU Archives is responsible for promoting understanding of university history by collecting, preserving, and making accessible unique materials that document this history. Collections consist of about 2000 linear feet of university records and donated materials from alumni, faculty, staff, and students, dating back to the founding of the university in the mid-1840s. The Archives is staffed by one archivist, who also has duties as a reference librarian, along with several student assistants during the academic year.

The archivist's teaching most often takes the form of the one-shot session. Faculty members teaching courses in history, anthropology, music history, English, studio art, and other disciplines have brought their classes to the library for hands-on sessions with archival materials. Typically, these sessions provide students with a very quick introduction to archives and an opportunity to explore a carefully selected set of primary sources from the collections. For these classes, faculty members want their students to gain experience analyzing the content and context of individual documents. The learning objectives from the *Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy* addressed in these sessions include 3A (examine a source), 3B (identify and communicate information from the source), and 4B (evaluate the perspective of the source's creator.) The archivist has designed and implemented several lesson plans that successfully meet these objectives. But one-shot sessions focused on document analysis still barely scratch the surface of the many nuanced aspects of primary source literacy. Until recently, interested students at Lawrence did not have any structured opportunities to broaden and deepen their primary source literacy skills.

The introduction of a December term (D-Term) in Lawrence's academic calendar provided a chance for the archivist to begin to fill this gap. The D-Term format requires 20 hours of instruction over two weeks (typically two hours every weekday) beginning after the close of the fall term. D-Term courses are meant to provide experiences outside of the regular curriculum: "focused, experiential learning in a small class of interested students led by a Lawrence faculty member."¹ The archivist proposed and taught a course entitled "Archival Discovery" in D-Term 2017, with the following advertised description: "An in-depth exploration of archives and archival research. The course will address the theory and practice of locating, contextualizing, interpreting, and using archival primary sources." As this text implies, the course incorporated a broad range of aspects of primary source literacy; however, the archivist chose to place a particular emphasis on learning objectives 2D and 4D. Together these two objectives focus on the interrelated ideas that 1) not all historical events are documented with records available for research; 2) there are many reasons for this, including chance, biases and power dynamics, and the actions of archivists or others; and 3) effective research requires not only examining existing records but also considering what records are not present and why. In the archivist's experience, students are usually (by necessity) focused on working with the sources they have at their disposal and are unaccustomed to considering these ideas. To fully understand archives and archival research, students must grapple with these big-picture concerns of gaps and silences in the documentary record. This case study will discuss how the course sought to engage novice undergraduate students with notions of ephemerality, biases, and silences in archives.

¹ "December Term," <http://www.lawrence.edu/academics/d-term>.

Narrative

In designing the syllabus, the archivist assigned a theme and relevant readings for each of the ten days of the course. Students were expected to complete the readings, to submit a short reflection to the archivist before class, and to come prepared to discuss the readings with their peers. The archivist planned the course envisioning six to eight students enrolled, but there were ultimately just five students in the course. While the lower enrollment proved challenging in some respects, the five students were willing participants. The first half of each class period, about 45 minutes to one hour, was dedicated to discussing the readings. The second half generally involved a hands-on exercise with materials from the Archives' collections, selected to correspond with the day's theme. While many of the class sessions reinforced learning objectives 2D and 4D, two days were particularly intended to explore themes of ephemerality, biases, and silences. One was given the theme, "What do archivists do?," and another was themed "Archival silences." Each involved an exercise that placed students in the role of the archivist.

"What do archivists do?" was the theme for Day Three of the course. Students completed three readings in advance: "What Do Archivists Do All Day?"² by Samantha Thompson at the Peel Archives, "Keepers of the Secrets"³ by James Somers, and "Documenting the Now Builds Social Media Archive"⁴ by Lisa Peet. The archivist chose these readings to illustrate several points. Thompson's piece very clearly and accessibly delineates the many aspects of work that archivists do, from appraisal to preservation. This work is usually hidden from researchers, for whom an archival collection might seem like "raw material." In reading this piece, students began to understand the ways in which any collection might have already been heavily filtered or mediated by the time they encounter it. Somers' article explores similar themes from the perspective of a non-archivist. Peet's description of the "Documenting the Now" project broadened students' understanding of archivists' work to include records in the form of social media, emphasizing that archives are not only concerned with "old stuff."

The accompanying exercise for this class session challenged students to consider privacy concerns in providing access to archival materials. It was adapted from an exercise developed by Sean Heyliger and Juli McLoone, published as "Prioritizing Privacy vs. Access: Primary Sources in the Digital Age" in *Using Primary Sources: Hands-On Instructional Exercises*.⁵ To prepare for the exercise, the archivist selected different types of materials from the Archives' collections with a range of privacy considerations: a young girl's diary, infirmary reports with personally identified medical information, a selection of university records that contain faculty salaries, letters of recommendation for students and alumni from a professor's papers, and student publications from the 1990s. Using older records (past or near their applicable restriction date) helped to mitigate concerns about disclosing sensitive personal information or violating FERPA. Displayed on a projector screen, the "access continuum" that Heyliger and McLoone developed (see Appendix 1) served as an excellent visual aid for facilitating discussion. The archivist asked students to circulate among the materials placed around the room. For each set, students were to decide where they would place the materials on the continuum. Would they restrict access for a period of time? How long? Would they have any concerns about digitizing the materials?

² Samantha Thompson, "What Do Archivists Do All Day?" *Archives@PAMA blog*, July 15, 2015, <https://peelarchivesblog.com/2015/07/16/what-do-archivists-do-all-day/>.

³ James Somers, "Keepers of the Secrets," *Village Voice*, September 20, 2017, <https://www.villagevoice.com/2017/09/20/keepers-of-the-secrets/>.

⁴ Lisa Peet, "Documenting the Now Builds Social Media Archive," *Library Journal blog*, May 2, 2016, <https://lj.libraryjournal.com/2016/05/academic-libraries/documenting-the-now-builds-social-media-archive>.

⁵ Sean Heyliger and Juli McLoone, "Prioritizing Privacy vs. Access: Primary Sources in the Digital Age," in *Using Primary Sources: Hands-On Instructional Exercises*, ed. Anne Bahde, Heather Smedberg, and Mattie Taormina (Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited, 2014), 94–101.

After each student had a chance to examine each set of materials, the class discussed them in turn. Though students generally agreed on the access they would provide to the records, the archivist sometimes disagreed, which made for a lively discussion. Students were unaccustomed to thinking about privacy considerations, particularly regarding digitization and online publication. For example, they initially had difficulty understanding why a student-produced feminist zine from the early 1990s might not be an appropriate candidate for fully indexed online access. While prompting students to consider balancing privacy with access, the exercise also served to underline the degree to which archivists and others have control over the materials available to the researcher.

“Archival silences” was the theme for Day Six of the course. Assigned readings included Rodney Carter’s “Of Things Said and Unsaid: Power, Archival Silences, and Power in Silence”⁶ and a Radiolab episode on the Mau Mau and the British Archives.⁷ Carter’s article served as a scholarly, but accessible, introduction to the notion of archival silences. The Radiolab episode provided a real-world example of the potential consequences of silences in the archival record. Discussion in class focused on marginalization and power dynamics in archives, oral versus written documentation, the rights of groups to remain silent in the record, and ways in which archivists and others can work to fill silences.

The accompanying exercise for this class session again placed students in the role of archivist or curator, imagining that they are designing a small exhibit. It was adapted from another exercise in *Using Primary Sources*: Peter Carini’s “Quick Curation: Building Analytical Skills through Context and Juxtaposition.”⁸ The archivist gathered folders of material documenting two student protests at Lawrence in the early 1970s: a reaction to the Kent State shootings in 1970, and an African American Association student takeover of a campus building in 1972. Students were split into two groups, with each group responsible for one topic. They were asked to choose three items from the folder to include in a small exhibit about student protests during this era. After each group had made their choices, they explained the items and their decision-making process to the class. The class then considered the six items together as a representation of student protests in the early 1970s at Lawrence. Discussion questions included: Do these items represent the overall theme well? What is missing? After this discussion would anyone change the choices you made? What types of materials did you not see here that might have been more representative?

Students responded well to this exercise. They made efforts to include documentation of multiple perspectives on each protest, including students and college administration. They recognized the impact of choosing a variety of formats of materials, including newspaper articles, memoranda, and photographs. And they identified materials that were not included in what they were given that might have been more suitable for their exhibit. The exercise addressed learning objectives 2D and 4D by prompting students to consider two things: 1) their own role in shaping the narrative by including and excluding different sources in an exhibit, and 2) what might have been missing from the documentary record altogether, and why.

⁶ Rodney G.S. Carter, “Of Things Said and Unsaid: Power, Archival Silences, and Power in Silence,” *Archivaria* 61 (Spring 2006): 215–233.

⁷ Matt Kielty, “Mau Mau,” July 3, 2015, in *Radiolab*, podcast audio, <http://www.radiolab.org/story/mau-mau/>.

⁸ Peter Carini, “Quick Curation: Building Analytical Skills through Context and Juxtaposition,” in *Using Primary Sources: Hands-On Instructional Exercises*, ed. Anne Bahde, Heather Smedberg, and Mattie Taormina (Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited, 2014), 57–59.

Results

The archivist assessed each individual class session informally. Each student's submitted daily reflections gave the archivist a sense of whether they seemed to be understanding the main themes of the readings, and what questions they had prior to the start of each class. The following excerpts provide a sample of reflections from the Day Three and Day Six readings discussed above:

- "It's interesting to think about the amount of information that has to be discarded. How do/can archivists remain objective? How can they decide what should and will be kept or not?"
- "What I found most interesting in this piece ["Of Things Said and Unsaid"] was the discussion of natural silence versus unnatural silence, differentiating between a powerful silence by choice and a forced silence."
- "The way this author emphasizes the importance of recording a collective memory for the purpose of future generations, then supports the act of purposeful silence as an effective form of resistance seems conflicting. I understand it is up to those groups to decide if they want their future generations to have that collective memory, but if this author truly wants groups unmarginalized, wouldn't he argue against it?"
- "The meaning represented by the story in this episode of Radiolab could not be more clear, and the story that is being used to represent it is essentially a perfect example of the role an archival voice, versus an archival silence, can play."
- "I *loved* the podcast . . . It brought up the western notion of documents being the only reputable source of information. Being a literary language/society, this makes sense. However, it gives little respect to communities who do not use physical writing as their main source of memory keeping."

With reflections like this as a starting point, the archivist could use the class discussions to further probe ideas that students had generated, continuing to gauge their levels of understanding and see where there was confusion. Hands-on exercises during class were assessed similarly, through discussion during and after each exercise.

On the last day of the course, students completed a short feedback worksheet and discussed their reflections as a group. The themes of ephemerality, biases, and silences in archives loomed large in students' responses:

- "What are some main ideas that you will take away from this course?"
 - "Not everything can be preserved. People need to make decisions about what to keep."
 - "Any information, no matter how significant, can be forgotten if it is not preserved."
 - "Understanding of gaps in history / biases in what is documented"
- "What questions has the class raised for you? What are you still wondering about?"
 - "How do archivists choose what to keep and what to disregard? How do archivists avoid biasing a collection or imposing any of their own beliefs/interests on a collection? We talked about how archives can be biased based on what records were created or not, but I would like to learn more about the bias that comes from choosing what records to keep in archives."
 - "Is there a way I can help 'unheard' people in archives be heard and appreciated?"

- “This class has made me think about my own family’s history. Many of my relatives are old . . . I want to figure out what I can do to ensure their stories aren’t lost forever.”

These qualitative assessments worked fairly well for this course, with only five students enrolled. The daily reflections were essential in helping the archivist gauge students’ understanding of new concepts. Students also reported that the act of writing their reflections reinforced their learning. The end-of-course feedback was useful to a degree, but students likely would not have felt comfortable sharing very critical feedback with their peers and the archivist present. While students had the option of submitting anonymous course evaluations (as they do for all Lawrence classes), no one elected to do so.

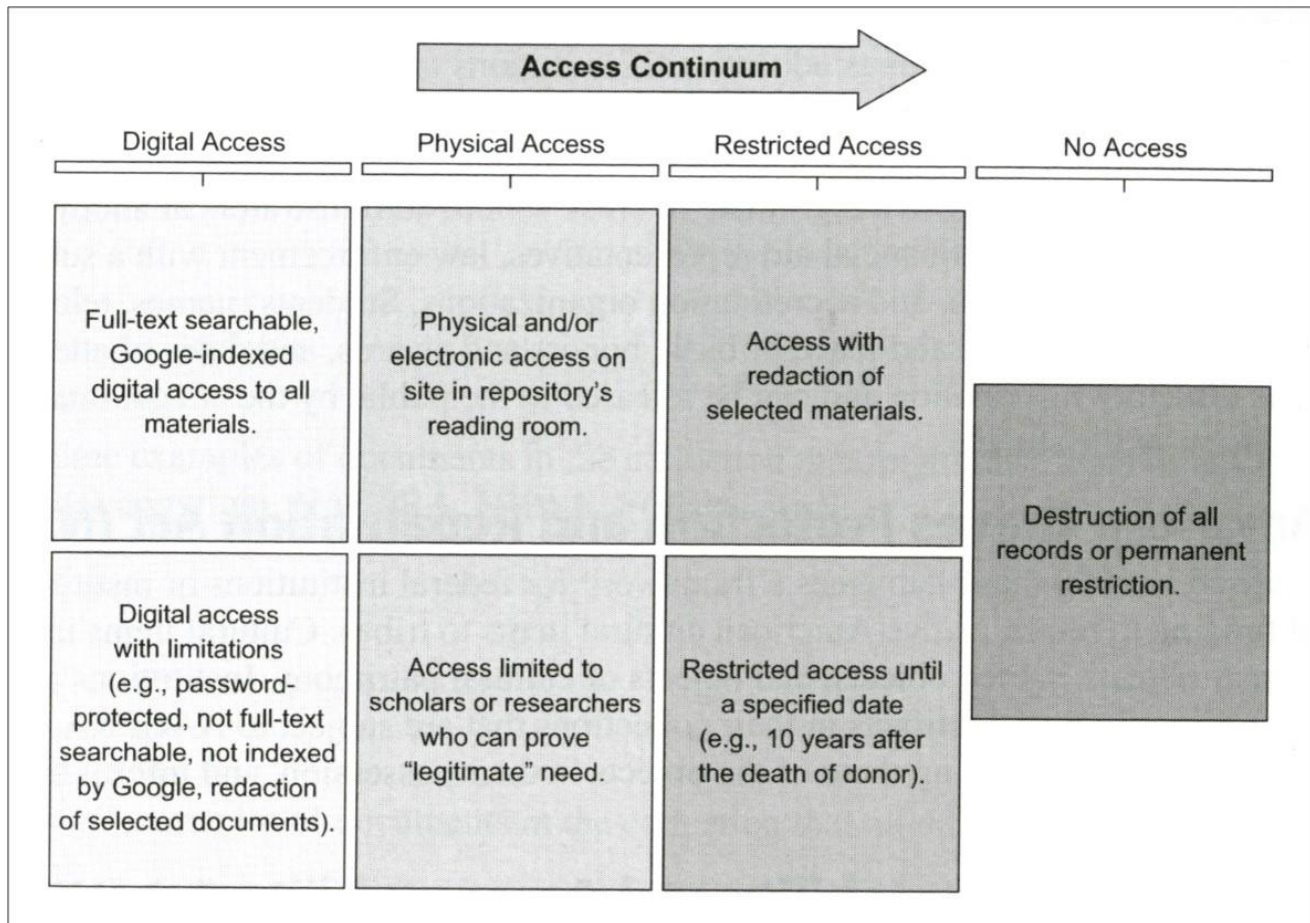
Lessons Learned

For the archivist, it was a great privilege to be able to design and teach this course and to work with the five intrepid undergraduates who took a chance on something new. In response to student feedback as well as her own assessment, the archivist will make some alterations to future iterations of the course. It seems clear that students could have benefited from more time discussing appraisal and selection and the problems with pursuing “objectivity” in doing this work. The “Quick Curation” exercise, while generally successful, suffered a bit from an unbalanced selection of materials such that one group needed much more time to complete the exercise than the other. And “archival silences” might be better scheduled on any day other than Monday, as class discussion was sluggish.

While most of the archivist’s teaching does not involve having full control over the experience, some of the lessons learned in teaching this course will certainly be applicable to collaborations with other faculty members. Students in the course engaged thoughtfully with the readings, and discussion of the readings strongly complemented the hands-on exercises. In the one-shot session scenario, students are usually coming to the class session with no prior knowledge of archives or archival research. Sessions like this could be significantly enhanced if students are assigned a relevant reading, chosen in collaboration with the faculty member, to be completed prior to visiting the Archives. The archivist plans to implement this change when possible.

Lastly, the emphasis that this course placed on helping students understand what might be missing from the archival record, or unavailable to researchers, and why resulted in eye-opening conversations for everyone. The archivist left this experience convinced of the necessity of including these learning objectives, even tangentially, in other primary source instruction sessions. The most frequent comment from students in the course (in relation to everything from archival silences to digital preservation) was “I have never thought about this before.” To spark new thoughts and facilitate these conversations with students was invigorating and inspiring, and the archivist will strive to bring this energy to future teaching experiences.

APPENDIX 1: ACCESS CONTINUUM



Sean Heyliger and Juli McLoone, "Prioritizing Privacy vs. Access: Primary Sources in the Digital Age," in *Using Primary Sources: Hands-On Instructional Exercises*, ed. Anne Bahde, Heather Smedberg, and Mattie Taormina (Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited, 2014), 99. Used with permission.