

CASE #9

Seeing Through Risk in the Special Collections Classroom: A Case for Flexibility

AUTHOR

Marc Brodsky

Public Services and Reference Archivist

Special Collections and University Archives, Virginia Tech

marc9@vt.eduLEARNING OBJECTIVES ENGAGED FROM [GUIDELINES FOR PRIMARY SOURCE LITERACY](#) BY THIS CASE STUDY

- 1.C. Draw on primary sources to generate and refine research questions.
- 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.
- 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.

CASE STUDY LOCATION

Special Collections and University Archives

Carol M. Newman Library

University Libraries, Virginia Tech

Blacksburg, Virginia

<https://spec.lib.vt.edu/>

PUBLICATION DATE

December 2019

Introduction and Institutional Context

Special Collections and University Archives at Virginia Tech (hereafter Special Collections) is a part of the Carol M. Newman Library, located on the university's campus in Blacksburg, Virginia. Founded in 1872 as Virginia Agricultural and Mechanical College, Tech is one of two land-grant institutions in the Commonwealth of Virginia. It is home to more than 34,000 students and offers approximately 280 undergraduate and graduate degree programs. The University Libraries, of which Newman Library is the main branch, is an Association of Research Libraries (ARL) institution. With a budget of approximately \$22 million in 2017, it ranked at the top of the lower third of ARL institutions on the basis of total library expenditures, and just above the midpoint in terms of the total number of professional staff.¹

Special Collections² currently has a staff of nine full-time archivists with an additional three grant-funded, term-limited positions. Between ten and fourteen students are employed by Special Collections in any given semester. The department holds approximately 2,000 manuscript collections and an onsite book collection of approximately 45,000 volumes with another 30,000 in storage and retrievable with a day's notice. As part of the library, its primary mission is to support the educational and research needs of the university, while, more specifically, it is devoted to collecting, preserving, and providing access to primary source materials.

Active collecting areas of Special Collections include: the American Civil War, Local and Regional materials, Science and Technology, and the History of Food and Drink. In addition to the University Archives, Special Collections is the home of the International Archives of Women in Architecture (IAWA) and has strong collections in Speculative Fiction, Ornithology, and 19th- and 20th-century British and American literary first editions.

All members of the Special Collections staff are invited to participate in a busy instructional program. Typically, about 30 sessions take place each semester, mostly one-shot sessions in conjunction with Virginia Tech courses. Currently, about 80 percent of these classes are led by the Public Services and Reference Archivist. While the English and History departments account for the majority of these classes, sessions have been held for courses from the Art Department; School of Architecture; School of Performing Arts; Department of Forest Resources and Environmental Conservation; Human Nutrition, Foods, and Exercise; African American Studies; and Engineering, among others. Additionally, Special Collections maintains an active K–12 program of instruction and has recently offered, for the first time, both a semester-long class on Archival Theory and Practice (taught by the Director of Special Collections) and a five-week series of classes for the Lifelong Learning Institute at Virginia Tech (taught by the Acquisitions and Processing Archivist). Other tours, in-house introductions to Special Collections, and outreach to nearby communities that includes archival instruction are ongoing.

With regard to instruction sessions provided for Virginia Tech courses, these occur either at the request of the course instructor or as a result of an overture or suggestion made to a course instructor by Special Collections personnel. If a course instructor is new or unfamiliar with Special Collections, or if the objectives of a class that previously has come to Special Collections have changed, an initial meeting is usually held between the course and session instructors. The purpose of this meeting is to discuss

¹ ARL Index 2017, <https://www.arlstatistics.org/analytics>. Total Lib Expenditures: Virginia Tech, \$21, 815,624; ranked 82 out of 123 ARL institutions. Total Professional Staff: Virginia Tech, 91; ranked 59 out of 123 ARL institutions.

² Special Collections and University Archives, Newman Library, Virginia Tech University Libraries, <https://spec.lib.vt.edu/index.html>.

course objectives for the session and possibilities for resources and activities offered by Special Collections that might best satisfy those objectives. Basic objectives for Special Collections, regardless of course, include providing a concise introduction to primary source literacy. This involves a discussion of primary sources—definition, types of materials, and challenges to interpretation, for example—along with instruction on the tools, skills, and methods required to use Special Collections effectively. In as many cases as possible, sometimes limited by the size of the class, this discussion is followed by an exercise that begins by putting a primary source into the hands of each student. The conversations that follow among students and with the session instructor not only make tangible matters relating to finding and engaging primary sources, they also encourage students to begin to recognize the value of primary sources for research. Insofar as most students arrive without having had the experience of working with actual documents, diaries, letters, and other original formats, the exercise also allows for the opportunity to create enthusiasm for this kind of work.

The following case study involves a collaboration between Special Collections and a first-year experience (FYE)³ class in the History department. The university charged departments to create FYE courses for all freshmen and transfer students, while leaving the specifics to individual departments. Typically a class of 50 or 60 students, the FYE History course (HIST1004) has developed to emphasize engagement with primary sources and the importance of undergraduate research. In short, it seeks to give students the experience of becoming practicing historians, including an opportunity to present their work publicly.

Narrative

In August 2017, the HIST1004 course instructor came to Special Collections to discuss the possibilities of a collaboration. She asked if the repository might provide materials to support a single, directed project to involve the entire class for part of the upcoming semester. She suggested a transcription project, a task that would provide a new experience for her students, allow them to practice an important skill, and provide a tangible benefit to Special Collections. The choice of an appropriate collection was essential. The Joseph F. Ware collection,⁴ which includes approximately 120 letters Ware wrote while serving in Europe during World War I and in the years immediately preceding and following the war, was well-suited to the task. These letters, written primarily to Ware's wife Susie, provided several advantages. World War I was especially relevant given the centennial of the United States' involvement in the war. They also provided a substantial connection to Blacksburg as Ware had served as commandant of the Virginia Tech Corps of Cadets and Susie lived in Blacksburg at the time of the correspondence. The collection was large enough to be appropriate for a class of approximately 50 students. The letters were in good condition and, for the most part, quite legible. Thus, examining a primary source (objective 3.A.) was the key apparent learning objective for the collaboration.

Two 75-minute class sessions were scheduled. The first was planned to provide an introduction to Special Collections generally, and the Ware collection specifically. The second was to emphasize the rules for producing transcriptions, provide students access to the original documents, and offer time for students to produce transcriptions. Special Collections agreed to scan as much of the collection as possible to make available a second avenue of access should that be useful after the scheduled sessions. The course instructor and the archivists also arranged a second planning meeting a week prior to the first class session to go over final arrangements.

³ First-Year Experiences @ VT, Undergraduate Academic Affairs, Virginia Tech, <https://fye.vt.edu/>.

⁴ Joseph F. Ware Collection, Special Collections and University Archives, Virginia Tech, <https://aspace.lib.vt.edu/repositories/2/resources/2575>.

The instructors from Special Collections recognized an element of risk in conducting the transcription exercise as planned. The size of the class made it necessary to hold the class outside Special Collections, and materials had to be brought to that external classroom. With 50 or more students filling a large room, it was impossible to monitor how the materials were handled by everyone at once, creating an acknowledged physical risk to the materials. Also, based on one of the session instructor's experience of teaching transcription in smaller, less extensive but more focused settings, there was a chance that a significant percentage of students would not find the exercise engaging. At the second planning meeting, that session instructor proposed to reduce the risk factors by identifying twenty of the most interesting and substantial letters and arranging students to work in groups of three to transcribe each one. The course instructor rejected the idea, arguing that each student should get at least one letter, a pedagogical desire to which the Special Collections instructor agreed.

The first class went according to plan. Students had been asked to read through the Special Collections introductory guide⁵ to help make the initial session more of a conversation and less of a lecture. A display of selected items was used to illustrate the range of materials found among the collections in lieu of the hands-on exercise. The Ware letters were introduced, the collection finding aid was displayed, and the students' upcoming assignment was described, as were the transcription guidelines (see Appendix 1). Lastly, students were reminded to follow proper procedures when they came to class to work on the letters: no food or drink was allowed in the room, students were to arrive with clean hands, and if they chose to write in a notebook, pencils were required.

At the second session, a third member of the Special Collections staff was on hand to help monitor the activity and assist students. Transcription guidelines and tips on techniques for deciphering difficult passages were displayed on screens around the room (see Appendix 2). One letter was handed out to each student. Almost as soon as students went to work, hands started to go up, and all the instructors were kept busy going from one student to the next to offer another pair of eyes, added experience, and reminders of useful techniques. Students began asking each other questions as a truly palpable excitement became evident in the room. Questions about one word or phrase became mixed with questions about the content of the letters themselves. Students pulled out their devices to get basic information about such topics as "Chateau Theiry" or the meaning of "A.E.F." Upon completing the transcription of their letter, some students asked for another.

The success of the two planned sessions led to a request for an unanticipated and unusual third session. The students had begun to claim the letters as their own, and they wanted to transcribe all the letters to know Ware's full story. As the course instructor described in a post-semester interview, she realized at this point "that the letters were going to take all semester" and "the richness of the collection and the students' interest simply took over."⁶ As she adjusted the remainder of the semester to accommodate this change, the archivists who had been involved with the students' transcription of the documents in the classroom setting started to see more students from the class in the Reading Room. They visited not only to complete additional transcriptions, but to seek assistance in understanding the various contexts of the letters. At this point the archivists' role expanded to encompass several additional learning objectives from the Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy by becoming involved in the students'

⁵ "Special Collections and University Archives: A Basic Introduction," <https://guides.lib.vt.edu/specialcollections/basicintroduction>.

⁶ Interview with Trudy Harrington Becker, conducted by Marc Brodsky, June 12, 2018.

analysis of the letters (objectives 4.B. and 4.C.) and, to some degree, in the formation of research topics for their final projects (objective 1.C.).

The students divided into groups based on associations among their various topics, and at semester's end presented their work at a research showcase open to the public. Each group created a series of digital posters that were presented in a large room with eight digital monitors around the perimeter. As the posters, which included images and transcriptions of Ware's letters, cycled through on the screens, students discussed their findings with those in attendance: friends, faculty, and individuals with an interest in the First World War.

Results

Perspectives from the course instructor and students provided most of the data from which the effectiveness and impact of the classes were assessed. These were informal assessments in that they were not measured or quantified. As mentioned earlier, the primary session instructor from Special Collections conducted a post-semester interview with the course instructor. Student responses were ascertained through the course instructor's comments, as well as from direct conversation with students at various points during the semester: at the instructional sessions, in the Reading Room, and at the research presentation. For all the instructors involved, the success of the class was readily perceived through the enthusiasm demonstrated by the students for their task, an enthusiasm that helped redefine the work students did and the ultimate direction of the course. One element of that enthusiasm—surprising, telling, and welcome—was expressed by the course instructor after the semester was over. She said that students did not want to work with digital images of the letters; they wanted the real documents, not facsimiles. For them, she said, “the power was in the real thing, the materiality of it.” It had to do with “the primacy of the paper.”⁷ For an archivist this is just one indication of success, but one that exceeds any realized by a Likert-scale assessment tool hastily completed by students on the last day of a semester.

There is, however, one assessment tool that was not available for the iteration of HIST1004 that is the subject of this case study, but that promises to be useful in the future. In place of typical patron sign-in sheets, a new digital system has recently been implemented at Special Collections. It will not only record when students come to Special Collections for instruction, and can be brought to sessions at offsite locations, it will also record when the students from a given class return to Special Collections to do work associated with that class. If all privacy concerns are protected, as assurances have been given will be the case, this system may be able to provide practical and helpful data in assessing student engagement following instructional activity.⁸

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ The form used was built locally using Qualtrics and is displayed on a touch screen (with a keyboard attached) at the front desk of Special Collections. For offsite use, the same form can be displayed on any networked tablet, such as an iPad. The main goals of the form are to:

- 1) Replace the paper form we'd been using that recorded all visitors by name and the purpose of their visit.
- 2) Protect patron privacy.
- 3) Improve the ability to connect visits to Special Collections (including for instructional sessions) to student outcomes.
- 4) Improve reporting on grant-funded researchers visiting Special Collections.
- 5) Offer a user-friendly form that would be quick and easy to fill out (especially useful when a large class visits).

Patron privacy has been improved as we collect only Virginia Tech ID numbers via either an ID card swipe or scan, rather than names. For non-VT patrons, we collect only the purpose of their visit and their status as not-affiliated with the university (a choice of options is offered). The ID numbers we collect are sent to the registrar's office, and they return

Lessons Learned

Small amounts of risk and a healthy dose of flexibility in a collaborative situation can lead to success. No documents were harmed during these sessions of HIST1004. Initially, at least with respect to the opinion of the primary session instructor from Special Collections, potential risk had been overestimated, whereas the enthusiasm of students had been underestimated. The first lesson learned might be best expressed as a reminder not to let an overdose of caution undercut the possibility of student engagement.

HIST1004 was designed to be an introductory course about acquiring skills, not about the First World War, yet it became a course concerned with both. The course instructor was flexible in her vision for the course and the archivists were more than willing to adapt to necessary changes. The underlying reason for the changes and need for the flexibility, however, indicates a second lesson for those who provide instruction in using primary sources: never underestimate the power of narrative often inherent in the materials with which you work. Primary source documents often tell a story, and offering students the opportunity to discover and follow these stories can be compelling. As the course instructor wrote in her own analysis of this course, “Though we had originally been concerned with Joseph Ware as a project in which to learn skills of transcription and [as] a World War I veteran of Virginia Tech, the students could not let Joseph go because we were going to tell his story.”⁹ It was the compelling interest in his narrative that provided the platform from which students considered the wide range of topics presented at the public showcase: not only Ware’s biography, but also, for example, the politics of the war and America’s involvement, life of the soldier at the front, censorship, and the progression of the war itself.

The expansion of the class objectives to include a more substantial view of World War I, however, did not occur without cost. There was never enough time to fully devote to these topics, either as warranted by their complexity, or desired by the students. By expanding the task of the class, all the instructors had to be open to leaving students with many questions, as well as providing answers. Necessary gaps in research due to the constraints of time were accompanied by gaps in the archival record with which students also had to struggle. Where were Susie Ware’s letters? What were her responses to Joseph? They apparently do not exist. Although not among the original objectives for the course, familiarizing students with absences in the historical record (see learning objective 2.B.) became another unintended consequence of the course. To put it another way: welcome to the world of the working historian! The overarching provision of such an introduction, though, was precisely the organizing objective of HIST1004.

In summary, and important for all those who provide primary source instruction, if presented with that large-scale, classroom-based opportunity to introduce students to the experience of working with primary sources, consider your materials carefully, be willing to alter your lessons and plans, look for a story to tell, don’t be overly concerned with risk, and take that opportunity. Better yet, suggest it to an instructor who may simply assume it’s not possible.

anonymized data about course of study, year, number of visits, etc. to the library’s data analyst. Note that this system does not replace a separate system for tallying reference inquiries, consultations, etc.

⁹ Becker, Trudy Harrington, “The Mystery of the Commandant’s Writing: Turning First-Year Students into Researchers,” *Perspectives on History: The Newsmagazine of the American Historical Association*, October 15, 2018. <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/november-2018/the-mystery-of-the-commandants-writing-turning-first-year-students-into-researchers>.

Appendix 1: Student Handout

Transcription Conventions for Special Collections For HIST 1004 (Fall 2017)

Naming your file

Please either name your file the following OR include it at the top of your transcription:

Ms2010-022_WareJoseph_yyyy_mmdd_Transcript

Transcribing

The transcript text should be written as close as possible to how it appears on the page:

- Type the words line for line, so that each line on the page should have a matching line of text in the transcript using paragraph breaks (hitting Enter) Exception: If a word or phrase to be inserted was written above the line or in the margins, just insert it in the correct place as it should be read in the line. If there is a blank line, create a blank line in the transcript as well.
- If the text continues from the last page of a letter onto the top or side margins of the first page, after the last line of text on that appears on the last page write a line in italics in brackets Ex: [*Continued on page 1*] then add the lines of text that continue on the first page underneath. On the first page, write a line Ex: [*Continued from page 4*] then write the lines of text above the starting lines of the letter.
- Mark page breaks with a line of underscore _____
- Type each of the words with the spelling, grammar and punctuation (or lack thereof) exactly as they appear.
- If a word was crossed or scratched out, but still possible to read, type it and use ~~strikethrough~~.
- If a specific and significant name of a person, place or event is mentioned, amend it with the full name with correct spelling in brackets.
Ex: "gen'l maclellan [George B. Maclellan] gave orders today"
Ex: "we traveled to Salliersville [Salyersville, KY] yesterday"
- If a word or words are unclear or you aren't sure, put a question mark for each word in brackets or put your best guess (within the context of the sentence and the appearance of the letters) within brackets with a question mark on the end.
Ex: "I am [??] today"
Ex: "we marched to the [swamp?] after breakfast."

Hints


- Read the rest of the sentence and use context clues to help guess a word that would be a logical option.
- Look for examples of how the author forms letters in a word you've already transcribed. If you know their "h" looks a certain way, you can start to identify it and contextualize letters around it.
- Zoom in on the word to examine the letters (if you're working from a photo or scan).
- Refer to Google if you have part of the word. It may be a technical or archaic term or abbreviation that you are unfamiliar with.
- Get another set of eyes if you still aren't sure—ask a neighbor.

Appendix 2: PowerPoint Slides Displayed in Classroom to Help Students with Transcription

Slide 1

Please put at the top of your transcription


- Ms2010-022_WareJoseph_yyyy_mmdd_Transcript
- Date Written:
- Written By:
- Written To:
- Place Written:
- Document: Handwritten? Pen or pencil? Size of paper?
- (Put at the bottom) Themes/tag words:



Slide 2

Transcription Hints (also, see the handout!)

- Please either name your file the following OR include it at the top of your transcription: Ms2010-022_WareJoseph_yyyy_mmdd_Transcript
- Type each word as it is written—don't change spelling, grammar, or punctuation
- Mark page breaks with a line of underscore _____
- Word scratched out? Use ~~strikethrough~~ if you can read it
- Having trouble reading the handwriting?
 - Look for similar letters in a word elsewhere to help identify how the author forms it
 - Read the rest of the sentence for context clues
 - Ask a friend (or an archivist!)—a second pair of eyes can be helpful!
- Still can't read a word? Replace it with a [?]



Slide 3

Page Breaks

Text text text...

Text text text

