



Supporting Teaching with Primary Sources at the University of Miami

Executive Summary

September 3, 2020

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INTRODUCTION

From spring 2019 until summer 2020, researchers at the University of Miami (UM) conducted an IRB-approved study on the practices of 15 humanities and social sciences instructors who teach with primary sources. Sponsored by University of Miami Libraries, this local study joins a suite of 25 parallel studies across the United States and United Kingdom, coordinated by Ithaka S+R, a nonprofit research and consulting organization that will publish a capstone report in fall 2020. This study and its broader discourse will help UM understand how to effectively support the needs of instructors who teach with primary sources.

PROJECT OBJECTIVES

Discover how instructors teach with primary sources, which physical and digital collections they access regularly, and how they describe the benefits of this engagement for student learning.

Identify challenges that instructors face to develop recommendations to support teaching with primary sources at the University of Miami.

METHODOLOGIES

Qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews with 15 instructors of record at all ranks

Departments represented: History, Modern Languages and Literatures, Art and Art History, English, Teaching and Learning, Anthropology, Geography and Regional Studies, and Religious Studies

DISCOVERIES

TRAINING

Most faculty (save recent graduates) described **inadequate training** for teaching with primary sources, though **personal connections** with libraries, museums, and archives compensated for this lack for others. **Best practices** were learned from mentors and colleagues through **experimentation** and in **collaboration** with distinctive collections librarians, archivists, curators, educators, and museum professionals. Other training opportunities came from **academic units** at UM like the Learning Innovation and Faculty Engagement team in Academic Technologies. **Student training needs** centered on issues of **curation, information literacy, and digital skillsets**.

PRIMARY SOURCES

Overall, most faculty agreed that UM has **excellent primary sources** found at Special Collections, the Cuban Heritage Collection, and the Lowe Art Museum, and they noted the routine and creative ways that they have taught with these physical materials. When collection holdings at UM did not match research areas, instructors relied on **digital primary sources** from other institutions throughout the world.

Primary sources used for teaching at University of Miami

- *artworks*
- *cookbooks*
- *archival materials*
- *zines*
- *music*
- *artifacts*
- *artists' books*
- *historic maps*
- *folios*
- *film*
- *Pan Am Collection*
- *Jackie Gleason Archives*
- *Cuban Theater Digital Archive*
- *University Arboretum*
- *Public Sculpture Program*
- *Digital Collections*

Primary sources in **physical and digital forms** were presented by faculty as equally important. Tangible access to primary sources was essential

for student learning, but the need for **physicality** could be limited by conservation necessities, particularly in the case of the Lowe Art Museum. **Digital surrogates** gave students the ability to engage and connect with such resources beyond the class or institution.

COLLABORATION

And the libraries are us, not libraries are them (University of Miami.06, 98)

Several respondents commented on how colleagues from Special Collections, Cuban Heritage Collection, and the Lowe Art Museum were not separate from faculty but were **partners and co-facilitators** in the learning process. Some instructors worked with collections beyond campus, but most often instructors collaborated with UM librarians, archivists, curators, educators, and museum professionals who introduced students to primary sources, their collections, and the research process. These different perspectives greatly enhanced students' experiences and understanding.

PEDAGOGY

A lot of my goals with working with primary sources are also interpretive, so part of the main skills I'm teaching students are [sic] a close reading analysis, making an argument based on evidence, based on what's in front of them ... how can you better interpret this object when you consider it as a material form, not just as a textual form (University of Miami.06, 99)?

Pedagogy was central to the discussion of primary sources despite differing learning goals and outcomes, and as a group the instructors **valued both physical and digital primary sources** for teaching. The main question they asked was: **"Is it worth it?"** Participants reported that engaging students with primary sources required identifying valuable connections to course curricula. The work also involves time and coordination by both the instructor and those who oversee the physical collections as well as patience to sift through online sources.

Most Common Class Type: Upper-level undergraduate

Ideal Size: Small class or small groups

Central to Disciplines: Art History, History, and Religious Studies

Courses: African Studies, Ancient Art, Anthropology, Archaeology, Art History, Cartography, Classics, Gender and Sexuality Studies, Creative Writing, Greek and Roman Art, History of Science in the Book, Islamic Art, Latin American Studies, Material Culture, Medieval Art, Modern Languages and Literatures, Museum Studies, Musicology, Religious Studies, Spanish, and Spanish Art

Frequency: Once per week, several times per semester, a few times per semester, once per semester, and once per semester but with materials on reserve for student access

Every instructor spoke about how the pedagogical power of primary sources is unleashed through preparation. Although a priceless object itself might inspire wonder, curiosity, and awe, it is the **curricular foundation** and **background knowledge** that allows students to deeply engage with these collection materials. Most instructors highlighted the **importance of librarians, archivists, curators, educators, and museum professionals** in providing students with an introduction to primary sources and collection materials.

PEDAGOGICAL APPROACHES

Connectivity—*discovering relationships between sources and social, political, and historical contexts*

Diversity, Equity, Access, and Inclusion (DEAI)—*representing marginalized groups*

Visual Thinking Strategies—*promoting critical thinking, dialogue, discussion, multiple perspectives, and supporting evidence*

Literacy—*introducing maps, old texts, texts in other languages, or visual symbols to aid interpretation*

Analytical and Critical Thinking—*practicing skills like slowing down, looking, describing, analyzing, interpreting, and synthesizing*

Materiality—*connecting with sources by handling and examining materials, and by considering the physicality of an object (construction and material composition, fragility, preservation, and conservation) as well as its ownership and movement from creation to being in a collection*

IMPACT

Faculty collectively agreed that primary sources were essential for the humanities and social sciences. Positive impacts included **increased literacies**, meaning that students become better and more astute visual and textual readers; the acquisition of a **wider scope of the world** through multiple stories and perspectives; and the opportunity for **students to become stakeholders in the collections** through innovative assignments. Working with primary sources also gives students **transferrable skills** in analysis and communication that can aid them in their future professional lives, regardless of area of study.

Technology has had a tremendous impact on object-based learning, including the creative use of new technologies such as virtual reality and augmented reality, photogrammetry, 3-D digital and physical modeling, and mapping software. Additionally, faculty noted that through technological tools, students have **greater access** to materials that are largely unavailable by distance or historical transformation. In addition to accessibility, technologies invite students to draw **increased connections** between the physical and cultural contexts of primary sources.

CHALLENGES

Access and discovery limitations are important challenges when looking at the collection itself, as storage and preservation practices mean that objects of interest are mostly **out-of-sight** for classroom and research audiences. **Sizeable collections** compound access and discovery issues, with instructors citing difficulty with finding aids and online collection databases as well as lack of staffing. **Collections priorities** and acquisition strategies can affect pedagogical strategies, limiting what is available for a school or college's curriculum. Other **pedagogical challenges** include **logistical** ones (limits around time and resources for course incorporation, timing for accessing the collections, and space available for large classes), and challenges with **student interest and literacy** for working with the materials.

Finally, while technology has generally been a boon to teaching with primary sources, **limitations with technology** have challenged the enterprise in interesting ways. The **additional work of learning software** needed to navigate and engage with artifacts can be a substantial limitation for reluctant students. The **“burden of plenty” or sheer volume of available materials** can create navigational and evaluative struggles for both faculty and students. Further difficulty comes from the resources themselves, which may be of **poor quality**, take too long for students to access, and require additional teaching on how to evaluate them for veracity and validity.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

CONCLUSIONS

Many faculty members were supportive of teaching with primary sources and listed various benefits that undergraduate students received from such engagements. However, faculty believed that electronic resources and digital surrogates could significantly enhance these interactions. The push for digitization raised issues about accessibility, availability, and materiality that the recommendations below seek to address as faculty transition to remote learning. Central to this was the notion that subject librarians, curators, archivists, educators, and museum professionals were all needed to advertise and promote the various kinds of primary sources available at the University of Miami. There was also consensus among instructors that training and support services within the institution, UM Libraries, and the Lowe Art Museum were essential in fostering such benefits. Training opportunities and services were deemed crucial for both faculty and students.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Teaching with Primary Sources during COVID-19

Communicate availability to partner with faculty to engage students with primary sources in online contexts and increase digital access of materials.

Develop Training Opportunities for Faculty and Students

Develop standardized training sessions for faculty and students with the Learning Innovation and Faculty Engagement program in Academic Technologies (LIFE) as well as the Platform for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (PETAL). Sessions would include the following:

- introduction to primary sources
- overview of the specific UM resources
- navigation of online collection databases and finding aids
- object-based learning methodologies with sample assignments
- tutorials on digital primary sources and how to vet them

Streamline Access to Primary Sources and Technology

Create a systematic way of incorporating digital primary sources and technology by working with the LIFE team in Academic Technologies; UM Libraries Liaisons and Data Specialists; Lowe Art Museum; and other potential partners on campus.

Improve Digital Primary Sources

Provide better digital access to primary sources, including quality images and improved navigation of UM collections, and also centralize quality online image repositories of other collections.

Foster Collaboration between Distinctive Collections

Encourage a seamless experience for classes with University Archives, Special Collections, Cuban Heritage Collection, and the Lowe Art Museum, with greater synergy between the four collections to work with each other and assist faculty, staff, and students.

Promote Distinctive Collections

Develop strategies to more effectively reach faculty and students through exhibitions and programming.

Incentivize Instructors to Teach with Primary Sources

Recognize instructors who teach with primary sources by offering career building incentives that align with areas of teaching, research, and service across the University of Miami.

Strive for Excellence / Prepare for Impact

Guide faculty and students to make dynamic connections between primary sources of the past and larger concerns of the present. Through careful planning, engagement with primary sources can have a lasting impact on student learning.

[For the full report, please visit scholarship.miami.edu.](https://scholarship.miami.edu)