



Primary Source Literacy in the Era of COVID-19 and Beyond

Heidi Craig and Kevin M. O'Sullivan

abstract: This article reports upon the development and implementation of a new literary research methods course in a remote teaching context. This updated curriculum is predicated on the notion that digital and traditional methods each work best when they expand and improve the other. Key facets of the new curriculum are outlined, with sample topics and assignments that serve to scaffold students' understanding of primary source research in a remote learning environment. This article demonstrates not only how a program of experience-based, hands-on approaches to primary source literacy instruction may proceed in a time of social distancing but also how lessons learned during the pandemic may promote more effective research methods and instruction for the post-COVID era.

Introduction

The COVID-19 health crisis and the resulting transition to research and learning from a distance have forced many educators to rethink approaches to primary source literacy.¹ The pandemic has urgently prompted the development of remote instruction and assignments to help students succeed both during the crisis and in the future. In February 2020, the authors (an instructor of English literature and a curator of rare books and manuscripts at Texas A&M University in College Station) were awarded a Texas A&M University Libraries Information Literacy grant. The funding was to support the redesign and implementation of a foundational course

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serving humanities graduate students, Bibliography and Literary Research Methods (ENGL 603). This updated curriculum was initially created to give equal attention to digital research methods and research conducted with physical materials by foregrounding two key areas of primary source literacy: artifactual literacy, understanding the relationship between physical form and intellectual content, and archival intelligence, the ability to navigate special collections infrastructures and successfully locate relevant primary sources.² The authors intended, in particular, to acknowledge the increasingly prominent role of digital materials in research and to problematize what they viewed as an unproductive separation between digital and “traditional” physical primary source materials. In so doing, the authors approached revising ENGL 603 with two questions: How can students most fully experience special collections in online contexts, and how can digital learning be destigmatized? The initial plans for the redesigned course were disrupted by the outbreak of the pandemic. This article relates the authors’ experience adapting the course for implementation during the COVID-19 era. This new primary source literacy curriculum continues to foreground hands-on experiences while also drawing from digital source literacy. As the course shifted to remote instruction, the authors foregrounded digital resources and online forms of instruction as anticipated. Perhaps more surprisingly, several “hands-on” forms of primary source instruction readily relocated to at-home learning environments. Such results show great promise for expanding where and how primary source literacy instruction can take place in the future.

Primary Sources: Digital and Traditional

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on teaching with primary sources, Patrick Garcia, Joseph Lueck, and Elizabeth Yakel note a dominant trend of such sentiments among the 154 works cited, describing “exposing students to the ‘magical awe’ of working with analog archival materials” as “a key engagement strategy.”³ A blog post from Dartmouth College’s Rauner Special Collections Library notes the “aura” of primary sources, describing it as the “mystical energy that surrounds authentic historical artifacts.”⁴ The Rauner blog argues that the “tremendous rush” people get from seeing and interacting with original materials “opens people’s minds to new ways of knowing, excites their imaginations, and, we think, makes them more likely to learn from their encounters.”⁵ The implication is that immersion in the “mystical energy” of original documents will spur focused intellectual engagement with the artifacts. Anne Bahde and Heather Smedberg have gone so far as to claim that “instruction using original materials can spark passion, transform understanding, and change students’ lives.”⁶

While such discourse runs the risk of oversentimentalizing primary source research, it hits upon the more ineffable benefits of bringing students to a special collections



reading room to use physical resources. To be sure, one relies on the archive's aura to get students excited about research. But there are also concrete, quantitative benefits in addition to these emotional ones that come with thoughtfully designed primary source literacy instruction. On a practical level, students become attuned to new aspects of a text, such as the reciprocal influences of form and content on meaning. They learn to pursue a new pace in their research, one that may be significantly slower and more painstaking than that to which they are accustomed. Magia Krause notes that, in addition to evoking awe, encounters in the reading room

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also "offer a chance for students to take more control of their learning experiences . . . to form their own questions and develop a deeper understanding of the units they are studying."⁷ Similarly, Brianna Gormly and her coauthors cite the potential for work in special collections to "help students feel like they have discovered something, inspire curiosity, and add credibility to their work."⁸ Such experiences lead to new avenues of research inquiry, spark new ideas, and create an emotional bond between the student, the artifact, and, potentially, the research institution in which it is held.

Time spent in special collections will benefit any and all who avail themselves of these resources. For graduate students, in particular, primary source instruction is especially important, as it forms a central part of their training in research methods and contributes to professionalization. Delivering such instruction to new graduate students—in this case, the master's and first-year PhD students of ENGL 603—thus carries with it a special responsibility. As part of their formal professional training, primary source instruction and exercises are vital to the formation of lasting research skills and good scholarly habits. Moreover, the use of physical archives bestows cultural

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and professional cachet. Properly handling materials necessitates the acquisition of certain specialized skills, and many institutions require a minimum qualification for admitting readers. Actually working in physical archives also provides field experience, a sense of community, and, in some cases, financial incentives and awards. Because of the manifold benefits—pedagogical, emotional, professional, and financial—of primary source instruction, it is the duty of faculty and special collections professionals to develop engaging curricula that keep pace with the evolving nature of scholarly research and meet the needs of each successive cohort of new students.

The digital turn over the last several decades has had a dramatic impact upon the nature of modern scholarship for everyone involved: institutions, instructors, collections professionals, and students. Long-standing online resources such as *Early English Books Online* and *Eighteenth Century Collections Online* are now standard pedagogical and research tools. Libraries, museums, and other institutions of cultural memory around the world are digitizing significant portions of their holdings and making them available online—a trend that, if continued, should greatly democratize access to special collec-



tions. Until recently, a scholar could not simultaneously analyze two copies of a book that physically exist on separate continents. Such opportunities are now so commonplace, they

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might be taken for granted. Of course, as more research activity moves online, it remains vital to offer students the opportunity to experience the aura of the archive through grounding experiences working with physical primary sources. The authors submit, however, that special collections practitioners and course instructors should invest the same time, care, and energy into fostering research skills for digital primary sources as they do for physical materials. Many special collections practitioners, even as they praise digital resources, also state that

“there is simply no substitute for looking at original books, manuscripts, or videos—the material as originally authored.”⁹ While digital and “traditional” approaches to research are sometimes presented as competing or mutually exclusive, they should instead be considered complementary and congruent. Reconciling the two approaches is not only pedagogically effective but also more inclusive, more realistic, and more supple, as it allows for a wider range of engagements if one approach becomes less viable.

In their study on the compared efficacy of physical and digitized primary sources, Meggan Press and Meg Meiman identify a long-standing bias in favor of physical materials in primary source instruction. They also affirm the possibility of conveying the “aura” of special collections through digital resources.¹⁰ As their findings indicate, “the format of a source does not significantly affect student learning or engagement,” and students can exhibit “a significant degree of curiosity and conversation with one another” in the use of digital materials as well as physical.¹¹ By the authors’ own admission, the scope of the study was limited to “the rhetorical features of written content in primary sources” and did not deal with the materiality of the objects.¹² Nevertheless, their results demonstrate a strong potential for classroom instruction using digital materials. Guided instruction exercises like those outlined by Press and Meiman provide an ideal way to introduce the strengths and limitations of using a digital surrogate and the questions that must be asked of a physical artifact. Understanding such questions and recognizing when they will likely arise are foundational skills of modern scholarly research, which exists most often as a hybrid process using physical and digital primary sources in concert. In dialogue with this literature, the authors of this article revised the curriculum to unite archival and artifactual materials with digital surrogates and born-digital artifacts, seeking both to enhance their pedagogical project as well as contribute to the growing scholarship of digital primary source literacy and its intersections with more traditional forms of research.

Redesigning Primary Source Instruction: The ALAI Project

The project “Artifactual Literacy and Archival Intelligences” (ALAI) was conceived in late 2019 as a response to trends in the teaching of primary source research methods. Historically, the ENGL 603 course was designed to familiarize graduate humanities

students at Texas A&M with the process of primary source research. The learning goals included how to request materials and handle them properly; how to evaluate, interpret, and reflect upon the resources' content, creator or creators, and context; and how to recognize gaps and silences in the archive.¹³ Special collections practitioners at Texas A&M's Cushing Memorial Library and Archives have long been integral contributors to this foundational graduate course, providing instruction related to such practical skills as formulating research questions and navigating the library's catalog. They also address more theoretical concerns, such as the relationship between the objects in hand and the cultural histories of writing, books, and printing.

Working as a project team, the authors reshaped ENGL 603 into an interactive course that foregrounds primary source literacy, developing artifactual literacy and archival intelligence in both physical and digital spaces. Artifactual literacy has been defined as the "practice of criticism, analysis, and pedagogy that reads texts as if they were objects and objects as if they were texts."¹⁴ Complementing this literacy is archival intelligence, "an understanding of archival systems and principles that enable the user to navigate and utilize" collections and records housed in archives and other repositories.¹⁵ From its conception, the ALAI Project curriculum was predicated on the notion that digital approaches to research are not at odds with traditional ones; rather, the two complement and improve each other. The authors therefore chose to foreground primary source-based instruction that heavily featured digital primary sources and research methods. They sought to convey both the affinities and distinctions between digital primary sources and their physical counterparts, and to acknowledge digital research as a necessary, appealing, and indispensable element of current academic practice.

In 2004, Jerome McGann recognized the need to rethink the way research methods are taught, pointing to an "educational emergency" in humanities scholarship whereby the proliferation of digital technology was not attended by comparable digital instruction and theorization.¹⁶ He forecast that "in the next fifty years the entirety of our inherited archive of cultural works will have to be reedited within a network of digital storage, access, and dissemination" and asks whether scholars will be equipped to grapple with this new reality.¹⁷ The pace of digitization has steadily accelerated in the years since McGann's article appeared, and the urgency of adapting instructional methods has likewise increased. Yet, our "inherited archives" continue to exist in brick-and-mortar buildings alongside digitized archives. In his foundational *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts*, D. F. McKenzie asserts that our relationship to media is not marked by distinct periods—for example, the manuscript era, the age of print, or the digital turn. Instead, we have had a long and fluid progression in which technologies of textual production intermingle and affect one another across centuries. Thus, he claims that traditional bibliography is not only "an essential means by which we recover the past" but also a tool that holds "a quite new centrality" toward understanding our present.¹⁸ Rather than following a linear path toward the digital, humanities research constantly oscillates between different media; therefore, tested methods remain valuable even as new ones emerge and, indeed, inform those new approaches.

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The ALAI Project takes up McKenzie's proposition by seeking to answer the question "How can traditional bibliographical practice develop twenty-first-century information literate abilities?" The revised curriculum was designed in response to a pressing need in contemporary humanities education to improve students' understanding of the intersecting areas of artifactual literacy and archival intelligence. In practice, the curriculum deliberately scaffolds instruction, readings, and course deliverables, moving learners progressively to an ability to understand and critically evaluate texts and archives from a variety of social and historical contexts. Thus, over the course of the semester, students develop skills in an assortment of primary source research methodologies and are asked to reflect upon how these critical evaluations may be applied across different media landscapes. As scholars in the digital humanities often remind others, digital texts bear their own material characteristics—a "digital textuality."¹⁹ As such, they demand a unique kind of engagement on the part of the scholar and a tailored program of research methods instruction for graduate students in training.

This instruction also requires the identification of ethical concerns specific to the use of digital primary sources. Historically, digital research has been implicitly stigmatized by suggestions that "real" research is conducted in person at special collections libraries. These views reveal ableist and elitist assumptions about financial, geographical, and physical accessibility. Casting aspersions on digital research and resources can amount to a form of gatekeeping, reflecting anxieties about the threat that digital resources pose to well-established academic hierarchies. For example, Janine Solberg writes, "As barriers to accessing primary sources are lowered, digital tools may result in a devaluation of

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certain kinds of historical work or certain parts of the research process."²⁰ Online research is often disguised in citations as in-person archival study under the auspices of presenting more "legitimate" research. By obscuring the use of digital resources, scholars elide important evidence of the centrality of such sources to twenty-first-century research. What is more, such practices make invisible the work of the many information professionals who facilitate

access to those sources. In short, personal experience of special collections materials—or indeed of any text—does not necessarily connote physical experience.

The ALAI Curriculum during the Pandemic

Conceived in fall 2019, the authors' ALAI redesign was soon forced to confront the realities of the COVID-19 pandemic. It became clear that instruction in the humanities would have a major online component for the foreseeable future. Ready or not, like it or not, the era of remote primary source instruction had arrived.

Paeans to the irreplaceable benefits of primary source instruction have produced several quandaries in the COVID-19 era: How can we reproduce the enthusiasm sparked by engagements with primary sources when traditional physical materials are inaccessible or unsafe? Is it possible to do so without devaluing hands-on primary source research

methods? What can be done to ensure that students receive the most enriching primary source instruction available? During the pandemic, we learned measures to improve learning and teaching with primary sources in remote contexts. In a time when much research takes place online—no matter the state of global health—the authors hope that remote primary source instruction, strategically deployed, will establish a solid foundation for students' later engagements with primary sources, both material and digital. Such a foundation will enable them to be agile and strategic in their research.

In March 2020, when teaching, learning, and research suddenly shifted online, instructors and librarians began exploring strategies to adapt to this situation, creating and sharing new resources and gathering information about existing ones. The sudden shift required resiliency, flexibility, creativity, and haste. Because ENGL 603 was scheduled for the following academic year, the authors had the luxury of planning denied to many of their colleagues. For example, they greatly benefited from the rich discourse surrounding digital bibliographic instruction that emerged in and after March 2020 and wove many of these shared resources into the fabric of the ENGL 603 curriculum.²¹ During this time, many special collections libraries led by example, improving access to Web-based resources and fostering community through online special events with such features as live tweeting and real-time conversations with notable speakers.²² While pressures outside the authors' control reshaped the course, they also recognized that the historical moment presented positive possibilities for librarians, instructors, and students to think and respond creatively. For the remainder of this essay, the authors reflect on their responses to taking primary research instruction online and its outcomes.

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As the authors reenvisioned the ALAI curriculum for the realities of teaching during the pandemic, they strove to remain faithful to the spirit of the original grant project. They sought to reproduce the manifold benefits of the physical archive—its aura and its awe-inspiring and empowering effects—for students working in digital and domestic spaces. ENGL 603 is a mandatory course for humanities graduate students early in their course of study. It often marks the first time that graduate students set foot into a rare book room and interact with special collections materials. Typically, these physical encounters are reinforced later with exposure to digital resources. For ENGL 603 students in the 2020–2021 academic year, the usual order of instruction was reversed: their first archival experiences were digital ones, followed by physical interactions with historical materials at home. Additional class time was committed to further prepare students for eventual in-person visits to the physical archive, which might occur after the semester's end. Students were asked to consider how their experiences working remotely could translate to physical research. Thus, students, instructors, and librarians together sought to investigate what we can learn from this inversion of the traditional curriculum.

Historically, ENGL 603 students' archival and artifactual instruction began with a brief guided tour of Texas A&M's Cushing Library. Following the tour, students received a "show-and-tell" presentation from a library curator and were given a limited time



to interact directly with rare materials. During tours and presentations, students can be overwhelmed by the physical space of the archives as well as by the age, historical import, expense, and breadth of resources suddenly available to them. They might tentatively leaf through rare texts, nervous about ruining what they deem to be fragile, costly, and irreplaceable historical artifacts. Cait Coker and Todd Samuelson have pointed to such tutorials, in which the student plays a largely passive role, as promoting an impression of special collections as “a repository of obscure historical artifacts, with its curators represented as custodians of an interesting, if esoteric, historical hoard.”²³ These exercises can be useful for provoking students’ wonder and curiosity, but they do not necessarily lead to confident or intellectually rigorous engagements with primary sources.

For the spring 2021 iteration of ENGL 603, the authors aimed to transform a limitation—the relative inaccessibility of in-person archival visits—into an opportunity. By introducing students to archival study through digital means, the authors sought to demystify archival work in general. The students’ first interaction with the Cushing Library was online: they were instructed to browse Cushing’s website, where they learned about the library’s collections, area strengths, personnel, policies, and physical space. Trained on searching library catalogs and finding aids in a previous class, students could study artifacts online through analysis of metadata, holdings information, and digital collections. Online instruction, made necessary by the pronounced shift into digital spaces that took place during the pandemic, benefited from an increasingly ubiquitous digital literacy in the twenty-first century. Students found the online information regarding Cushing’s ample holdings and research policies more easily digestible and, thus, less overwhelming than it might be when experienced in person. Moreover, these exercises were not limited by class time, and students were encouraged to return to the library’s digital spaces again and again. These online interactions with the archives provided firm grounding for later assignments involving primary sources and gave the students more confidence when they actually visited the library in person. Most significantly, by introducing students to archives through digital interactions, the awe and mystery that surround early archival engagements were supplanted by more empowered, informed, and focused approaches to primary sources.

Equally vital to the success of students learning to navigate the library—whether digitally or in person—were consultations with special collections practitioners. Following their digital visit to Cushing, and prior to their primary source assignment (discussed later), students scheduled a remote consultation with the curator of Rare Books and Manuscripts. Informal conversations covered a range of introductory topics, such as the scholarly areas in which the student planned to focus; possible materials relevant to these interests; navigating the library catalog and the database of archival finding guides to locate items; and the logistics of requesting materials and using them



in the Reading Room. Beyond these rudiments, however, students used these one-on-one consultations to discuss a host of other issues, which offered important insights into their progress to the instructors. Students used the opportunity to pose foundational questions, which had not been discussed (or which they were perhaps uncomfortable asking) in the larger group setting, such as “What exactly does one do with a primary source once one has located an item of interest?” and “How can it be used for research?” Within the pandemic-induced remote learning environment of ENGL 603, these interactions provided a vital way to dispel anxiety and offer reassurance for the students. Such consultations, which are perhaps so commonplace as to risk becoming rote formalities, are integral to the success of a distance-learning experience of special collections. They provide emotional support and a sense of scholarly community that would typically be intrinsic to a traditional, in-person visit to the library.

While many of the benefits of the Cushing Library tour and presentation could be reproduced in digital encounters, hands-on interactions with collections materials could not. To replicate this experience, the authors made use of a bibliographical teaching collection. Unlike traditional special collections, teaching collections are made up of bibliographic materials that lack monetary value, rarity, or scarcity. The flexibility offered by such a collection makes it an immensely adaptable tool for hands-on instruction. The items in the teaching collection were acquired free or at a low cost from antiquarian booksellers, or else deaccessioned and removed from the stacks of the regular circulating library, where one can often find eighteenth- and nineteenth-century books. These materials offer a “wealth of historical features” but “are not considered rare or unique” and therefore “require no commitment to long-term preservation.”²⁴ Typically, in a classroom setting, students might be invited to select a book from a cart, investigate its material aspects, and articulate two responses for class discussion: what struck them about their chosen text, and what questions they would ask of its materiality. Designed before the pandemic and useful in prior pedagogical contexts, this exercise integrates seamlessly into remote learning contexts.

Students from ENGL 603 were each assigned a book from our bibliographical teaching collection that aligned with their research interests, made available through the library's contactless pickup system. These items ranged from handpress-era pamphlets to lavishly illustrated Victorian scientific treatises, and thus gave students an authentic experience of handling historical materials during remote learning. Students kept the books for the duration of the semester and analyzed them as part of their final assignment. While the books do not constitute collections items in the formal sense, students were expected to take good care of them and to that end were taught proper handling techniques. Any anxiety produced by such a responsibility was mitigated by reassurances that there would be no serious outcomes should anything happen to the books. In practice, students took this obligation seriously: in effect, they simultaneously embodied the roles of both researcher and custodian of the text. Moreover, in remote learning contexts, students had 12 weeks to interact with their texts instead of a single classroom session, leading to more and richer insights. When students had ample time to acclimate to the experience of using historical materials, they not only learned about the physical attributes of the books but also fine-tuned their physical skills in the care and handling of rare volumes.



That students took custody of their books also personalized the experience. Wanting to do justice to “their text” motivated them to look closely into its features, a practice

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again made possible because they had the books with them at home for several weeks. Student responses revealed their experiences of the “aura” of original materials at home. Through their multiple interactions with these texts, initial hesitancy gave way to more confident explorations. A student who was at first nervous to even open the assigned book was, within a few days, leafing through its pages and making discoveries. Through hands-on interaction with historical materials over a sustained period, nervousness and intimidation can give way to curiosity and confidence—something that is nearly impossible to do in

one-shot instruction. Keeping artifacts at home mitigated the pervasive sense that history must be practiced from a distance. In place of what one student described as a “history from afar” approach, domesticating the original materials foregrounded students’ own historicity and that of the texts. One student asked, “I wonder what other humans have touched this book,” speaking to the instructional value of prolonged tactile engagements with the text, in which students became part of its provenance.

In prior years, ENGL 603 students would visit Cushing Library’s Historical Pressroom, where they would set type and print on a wooden handpress. In an age of

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social distancing, this visit became impossible. Therefore, the authors attempted to reproduce aspects of bookmaking instruction with a bookbinding exercise. The lesson was inspired by colleagues Ryan Cordell, associate professor of English at Northeastern University in Boston, and Matthew Kirschenbaum, professor of English and Digital Studies at the University of Maryland in College Park,

who generously offered advice both about supplies and teaching methods. With assistance from Mary Uthuppuru of Colophon Book Arts Supply, an online retailer serving bookmakers, ENGL 603 students purchased inexpensive bookbinding supply kits. Before class, students watched YouTube videos and read instructional blog posts about bookbinding related to a simple five-hole pamphlet stitch. During synchronous class time over Zoom, the instructor demonstrated bookbinding with an inexpensive document camera; students followed along in real time. This collaborative hands-on exercise conducted at home managed to build fellowship that is often missing from remote learning. Working together, testing out different strategies, backtracking and fixing mistakes, laughing over peccadillos, and admiring their work, students chatted over Zoom and enjoyed a shared experience as one might when sitting in a classroom. In addition to learning about historically relevant binding methods, participants acquired a new skill



and also produced a bound notebook they could then use. The students reported that making actual objects countered Zoom fatigue by providing a rare instance of material engagement in our physically distanced times.

“Artifactual Literacy in the Archive and at Home”

Complementing in-class instruction, several short assignments were designed to develop artifactual literacy and archival intelligence. Students searched library catalogs, sought out physical and digital archives and resources relevant to their research interests, interpreted books as physical artifacts, and developed timelines and plans of action for incorporating their insights into their research. Students were also asked to demonstrate all these individual skills in their final assignment, “Artifactual Literacy in the Archive and at Home,” which consolidated two separate assignments envisioned in fall 2019. The first of these, originally conceived as “Primary Sources at Cushing Library,”

tasked students with locating, ordering, and physically engaging with a primary source (text or object) at Cushing Library relevant to their research interests. From this experience, they were to write a report demonstrating their knowledge of how to request and properly handle material, how to physically evaluate a tangible resource, how to craft an argument or interpretative narrative from primary sources, and how to follow ethical principles while conducting research. The second original assignment, “Plan a Visit to an Archive / Special Collection,” asked students to identify an archive or special collection at Texas A&M or elsewhere relevant to their research interests and develop a plan of archival work and associated deliverables. This plan could be specific, such as a fellowship application to a particular institution, or a general plan for future research.

Complications related to the pandemic pushed the authors to rethink both assignments. Although Cushing Library remained open to students via individual appointment for portions of the 2020–2021 academic year, the authors did not want to depend on the library staying open during uncertain times nor to compel students to visit public places during a pandemic. Moreover, given that many institutions cancelled their fellowship programs for the 2020–2021 and 2021–2022 academic years, the already largely imaginary exercise of writing a fellowship application might be demoralizing when that fellowship temporarily ceased to exist.

The new final assignment, “Artifactual Literacy in the Archive and at Home,” retained the strengths of the previous assignments while discarding their potential downsides. Students were asked to engage with three primary sources—a text or object, physical and digital—relevant to their research interests: (1) the book previously assigned to them from the bibliographical teaching collection; (2) a text or object held

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at Cushing Library (although they were not required to engage with it physically); and (3) a digital resource housed at another archive or special collections library. Students demonstrated their abilities to identify repositories relevant to their interests; to navigate a repository's access tools (including catalogs, finding aids, and databases); to locate primary sources—both physical and digital—and to engage with them productively and ethically; to develop arguments and narratives from these engagements; and to develop a plan of work that included timelines, materials, and outcomes. This single assignment developed and tested the same skills of artifactual literacy and archival intelligence as previously envisioned in two separate assignments. As an added benefit, the blended approach demonstrated the affinity of digital and traditional research methods, and the necessity and benefits of combining them as part of a robust research program.

Student reflections revealed a number of benefits in response to the final assignment, many of which have the potential for long-lasting and significant impact upon graduate student success in research. Several students reported that the restructured assignment enhanced both their appreciation for and their engagement with seemingly

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familiar resources. One student wrote, for example, "For the first time, I paid close attention to the components of the library website and discovered many ways to navigate [it]." Another reported finding a solution that "should have been obvious" when struggling to locate primary sources connected to their areas of interest: "I didn't realize how helpful it is to speak to librarians when trying to find resources relevant to your research! I

will definitely continue to reach out to librarians when I feel stuck in my own research!" The value of closely engaging with library catalogs and special collections professionals can sometimes appear self-evident and thus remain unspoken by instructors who are accustomed to such research assistance. In this case, the difficulty of reaching physical collections led to students' seeking new connections on campus.

Questions of access provided another consistent theme in student responses. Surprisingly, despite promises of democratization, digital resources sometimes proved

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less accessible than physical ones. One student noted that a digitized version of the book assigned to her from the teaching collection was missing crucial supplementary illustrations included in the physical copy, thus excluding online readers from a full understanding of the text. In another case, a student reflected

on the ethics of producing transparent and accessible digital resources for differently abled audiences after finding the subtitles appended to a digitized lecture to be largely



inaccurate. As this student averred, the same careful thought utilized in the production of physical sources is needed to ensure equitable access in the digital realm.

The careful integration of digital and physical research throughout the course was not only productive but also boosted morale during a trying semester. Despite the move to a distance learning model, the class participants nevertheless forged emotional bonds with the materials and institutions with which they worked. One student reported that consulting the library's resources (both digital and physical) created a sense of connection with the university, even as most classes were remote. Another noted that their original interest in digital humanities, which drew them to the class, was eclipsed by the section on descriptive bibliography, which offered new insights into digital artifacts. Sentiments such as these confirm the findings of Press and Meiman in regard to the efficacy of digital primary sources and prove the value of thoughtfully integrating digital and physical research methods into the curriculum.

Sustained exposure to a broad range of materials across media allowed students the opportunity to narrow and clarify their interests. For some, these engagements even led to new scholarly directions. For example, one student reported that composing the final assignment had immediate benefits for their research "as a way to think about and refine my research questions as I go into the preliminary and dissertation process." Another student's chosen digital primary source promised to serve as a springboard for future ethnographic research as they enter the next phase of their degree. Although not the original intention of the exercise, we were delighted to find that students discovered thought-provoking research questions in their books from the teaching collection. Retaining examples from the collection for several weeks, students could fully explore not only the book in hand but also its author and the cultural context in which it was produced. One student reported being drawn to deeper inquiry in a teaching collection book over the course of the semester, correctly identifying its anonymous author through online research and taking note of ownership markings and internal marginalia as well. In a typical one-shot instructional session, students lack the time or resources to develop a full understanding of a text for themselves. By incorporating such "long exposure" exercises, however, learners had an opportunity to more closely approximate the research experience. Taking ample time with this aspect of the assignment proved immensely rewarding for the students. On the one hand, as noted earlier, it allowed them to acclimate to the handling of historical material in a low-stakes setting. On the other hand, it productively historicized their own bibliographical work. As one student wrote, "I understand much better now [that appreciating] the circumstances in which people worked is central to understanding the actual work that they produce. For a short period, I was transported into the past." In this regard, the awe of the archive is alive and well.

Working with books from the bibliographical teaching collection cultivated the serendipity of researching in physical stacks or archives. While the instructors attempted to assign items from the teaching collection that aligned with students' research interests, these matches were often approximate at best. Nevertheless, one student reported making surprising discoveries relevant to their wider interests despite initial reservations about the text assigned to them. As they explained, key to this success was approaching the text with an open mind—an important lesson for anyone looking to hone their research methods. These sentiments were echoed by another student, who noted two important



lessons gleaned from the exercise: “The first is allowing one’s self, as a researcher, to look at [the] opportunity in front of you rather than for the one you wished you had.” The second is “a consideration of how focusing on only canonical works and writers erases people, places, ideas, and texts worth studying and thinking about.”

Reflections and Conclusions

Learning outcomes from the ALAI curriculum, such as developing skills of archival intelligence, translated seamlessly into digital contexts. Students identified and visited digital repositories; learned how to navigate access tools, including catalogs, finding aids, and databases; and determined which materials and collections within a repository were appropriate for a particular project. Moreover, students learned to engage with digital primary sources in a way that productively disrupted their notion of what kinds of materials are fit for “real research.” Without access to physical archives, students grappled with the advantages and disadvantages of working digitally and learned to scrutinize the information contained in physical artifacts and their digital surrogates.

While the spring 2021 iteration of ENGL 603 unsurprisingly made use of digital resources, the authors did not initially anticipate how many “traditional” exercises relat-

Unlike primary source instruction confined to a single, short session, lending students books from the bibliographical teaching collection yielded new insights and facility with the materials.

ing to primary source literacy could be easily and inexpensively reproduced at students’ homes. Indeed, domesticating primary source exercises often produced new, unforeseen benefits. Unlike primary source instruction confined to a single, short session, lending students books from the bibliographical teaching collection yielded new insights and facility with the materials. Students performed the roles of both researcher and collections custodian, as they were entrusted to keep and properly maintain the books for several weeks in addition to evaluating them. The bookbinding exercise also safely replicated aspects of the experiential learning modules usually carried out in the Historical Pressroom, enhancing active learning while building community among class participants.

Offering remote primary source instruction afforded a unique opportunity to assert the value of digital primary sources, using them in an ambassadorial role to the often-

Among its many effects on academic life, the COVID-19 pandemic demolished the myth that archival work must happen in person.

intimidating world of special collections. Among its many effects on academic life, the COVID-19 pandemic demolished the myth that archival work must happen in person. Introducing students to archives digitally made them more confident and better prepared when they visited the physical archive. Remote consultations with curators were useful and led to more productive in-person trips to the archive. Given that archival research often necessitates working at distant repositories, conducting preparatory work online through digital resources and remote consultations will ensure that time in the



archive is well spent once research travel resumes. Thus, such instruction affords students a useful independent research skill that will remain relevant beyond the pandemic.

This is a watershed moment: after the COVID-19 digital turn untethered scholars from brick-and-mortar archives, digital resources were developed and relied upon in an unprecedented fashion. When revising ENGL 603 in light of the pandemic, the authors envisioned that digital resources would be crucial for remote learning contexts. This insight was borne out by experience, as the course incorporated a wealth of materials created and made available by institutions and individuals, including digital surrogates, online lectures and workshops, and crowdsourced teaching guides. This experience has emphatically confirmed the powerful impact libraries, archives, and other institutions of cultural memory can have by strategically digitizing their materials and making them freely available online without usage restrictions. With large numbers of instructors and special collections practitioners now delivering remote primary source instruction, similar activities will likely continue beyond the pandemic. For example, the strategies laid out in this article could be readily employed by instructors at institutions that lack robust special collections near their campus.

In theory, the availability of digitized archival resources makes more materials accessible to students and instructors, no matter their location or ability to travel. This optimism must be qualified, however; necessary limitations on available resources often lead to already prominent voices, such as canonical authors, being further highlighted through digitization. To deepen these benefits associated with digital primary sources, academic librarians must increase digitization in strategic ways—ideally, in partnership with faculty—to recover and promote historically excluded voices in the digital archive. Seeking to understand these opportunities for improvement will ensure the continued efficacy of remote-based primary source learning.

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The ALAI Project began with the intention of developing a new curriculum of literary research methods that more accurately prepared graduate students for academic careers in the twenty-first century. While the course's rollout during the pandemic differed significantly from how the authors initially envisioned it, the experiences with the students in ENGL 603 offered significant insight that can help design more effective research methods and instruction for the post-COVID era. Lessons from the experience included the importance of uniting digital and traditional methods, the value of hands-on instruction that gives students agency over the material, and recognition of the tireless work and generosity of special collections workers and their institutions. These lessons and more abstract ones, such as the nimbleness, flexibility, creativity, and compassion for students and colleagues necessitated by the pandemic, will continue to serve the authors in the future. While the COVID-19 crisis will eventually end, the hard-won lessons learned during these months can be usefully applied in the research and teaching contexts of the aftertime.



Heidi Craig is an assistant professor of English at Texas A&M University in College Station and the editor of the *World Shakespeare Bibliography*; she may be reached by e-mail at: hcraig@tamu.edu.

Kevin M. O'Sullivan is an assistant professor, the curator of Rare Books and Manuscripts, and the director of the Book History Workshop at the Cushing Memorial Library and Archives at Texas A&M University in College Station; he may be reached by e-mail at: kmosullivan@library.tamu.edu.

Notes

1. Authorship of this article was shared in equal collaboration; attribution is thus listed alphabetically. We would like to express our sincere appreciation and admiration to the students enrolled in the spring 2021 session of ENGL 603 at Texas A&M University for their participation in this project.
2. Elizabeth Yakel and Deborah Torres, "AI: Archival Intelligence and User Expertise," *American Archivist* 66, 1 (2003): 51–78; here 52, <https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc.66.1.q022h85pn51n5800>; Peter Carini, "Information Literacy for Archives and Special Collections: Defining Outcomes," *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 16, 1 (2016): 191–206.
3. Patricia Garcia, Joseph Lueck, and Elizabeth Yakel, "The Pedagogical Promise of Primary Sources: Research Trends, Persistent Gaps, and New Directions," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 45, 2 (2019): 95.
4. Rauner Library, Dartmouth College, "The Aura of the Original," *Rauner Special Collections Library* (blog), December 7, 2018, <https://raunerlibrary.blogspot.com/2018/12/the-aura-of-original.html>.
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6. Anne Bahde and Heather Smedberg, "Measuring the Magic: Assessment in the Special Collections and Archives Classroom," *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Cultural Heritage* 13, 2 (2012): 152.
7. Magia G. Krause, "'It Makes History Alive for Them': The Role of Archivists and Special Collections Librarians in Instructing Undergraduates," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 36, 5 (2010): 401.
8. Brianna Gormly, Maura Seale, Hannah Alpert-Abrams, Andi Gustavson, Angie Kemp, Thea Lindquist, and Alexis Logsdon, "Teaching with Digital Primary Sources: Literacies, Finding and Evaluating, Citing, Ethics, and Existing Models," #DLFteach (Digital Library Federation Digital Library Pedagogy group), October 7, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.21428/65a6243c.6b419f2b>.
9. Dan Connolly, Kevin Guthrie, and Alice Prochaska, and with an introduction by Andrew Dillon, "The Implications of Digital Scholarship for Research Libraries," in *The Research Library in the 21st Century*, Douglas Barnett and Fred M. Heath, eds. (New York: Routledge, 2013), 58.
10. Although the professional literature boasts a wealth of resources designed to aid hands-on instruction with primary sources, the same cannot yet be said for those designed to facilitate instruction in digital primary research. One notable exception is Gormly, Seale, Alpert-Abrams, Gustavson, Kemp, Lindquist, and Logsdon, "Teaching with Digital Primary Sources."
11. Meggan Press and Meg Meiman, "Comparing the Impact of Physical and Digitized Primary Sources on Student Engagement," *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 21, 1 (2021): 105–6.
12. Press and Meiman, "Comparing the Impact of Physical and Digitized Primary Sources on Student Engagement," 108.



13. Learning outcomes for this instruction were informed by Carini's "Information Literacy for Archives and Special Collections," which outlines six standards that together comprise the knowledge areas of artifactual literacy and archival intelligences: Know; Interpret; Evaluate; Use; Access; and Follow Ethical Principles. Other professional literature includes publications in the "pedagogical cookbook" genre, such as Anne Bahde, Heather Smedberg, and Mattie Taormina's *Using Primary Sources: Hands-On Instructional Exercises* (Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited, 2014), which offers brief outlines for instructional modules that are easily adapted and employed.
14. Randy Bass, "The Garden in the Machine: The Impact of American Studies on New Technologies," <http://faculty.georgetown.edu/bassr/garden.html#rationale>, cited in Yakel and Torres, "AI," 52.
15. Carini, "Information Literacy for Archives and Special Collections," 194–95.
16. Jerome McGann, "A Note on the Current State of Humanities Scholarship," *Critical Inquiry* 30, 2 (2004): 410.
17. McGann, "A Note on the Current State of Humanities Scholarship."
18. D. F. McKenzie, *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 55, 12.
19. For more on this, see Alan Bilansky, "Search, Reading, and the Rise of Database," *Digital Scholarship in the Humanities* 32, 3 (2017): 511–27; Paul Fyfe, "An Archaeology of Victorian Newspapers," *Victorian Periodicals Review* 49, 4 (2016): 546–77; Ted Underwood, "Theorizing Research Practices We Forgot to Theorize Twenty Years Ago," *Representations* 127, 1 (2014): 64–72.
20. Janine Solberg, "Googling the Archive," *Advances in the History of Rhetoric* 15, 1 (2012): 68. On the unfair aspersions cast against digital archival work as a form of gatekeeping, see also Peter Stallybrass, "Against Thinking," *PMLA* 122, 5 (2007): 1580–87.
21. Scholarly communities and individuals created and shared teaching resources, assignments, and lesson plans. For example, Rare Book School, "RBS Online," <https://rarebookschool.org/rbs-online/>; Bibliographical Society of America, "BSA Webinars," May 1, 2020, <https://bibsocamer.org/news/bsa-webinars/>; TPS (teaching with primary sources) Collective, "TPS Community Crowdsourced for Moving Archival and Special Collections Instruction Online," 2021, <https://tpscollective.org/tps-community-crowdsourced-for-moving-archival-and-special-collections-instruction-online/>.
22. To name only a few noteworthy offerings that introduce key skills for book historians, see Folger Shakespeare Library's Critical Race Conversations, 2021, <https://www.folger.edu/critical-race-conversations>; and the University of Edinburgh Centre for the History of the Book's "Instructional Videos," 2021, <https://www.ed.ac.uk/literatures-languages-cultures/chb/instructional-videos>.
23. Todd Samuelson and Cait Coker, "Mind the Gap: Integrating Special Collections Teaching," *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 14, 1 (2014): 53.
24. Kevin M. O'Sullivan, "The Continued Case for Bibliographical Teaching Collections," *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 20, 3 (2020): 435.

This mss. is peer reviewed, copy edited, and accepted for publication, portal 22.1.