Teaching through Activism: Service Learning, Community Archives, and Digital Repository Building in MLIS Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

This paper reflects upon a set of Service Learning (SL) courses taught in the University of South Carolina's Library and Information Science (LIS) program. The classes discussed helped community archives build digital repositories and provided LIS students skills demanded by potential employers, while affording students chances to experiment with technologies and information organization practices in low-risk, innovative ways. While SL is not pedagogically new to LIS instruction, this paper expands discussion on how SL courses translate between undergraduate and graduate students and within in-person and online variants. The paper concludes with an exploration of the ethical challenges of teaching a course that worked with a community archive possessing express feminist politics, necessitating discussions of accessibility, organization and classroom engagement divergent from student's previous experiences.

TOPICS

Pedagogy; Students; Archives; Social justice; Information ethics

INTRODUCTION

Library and Information Sciences (LIS) programs place a heightened emphasis on the attainment of best practices methodologies rooted within idealized versions of future job environments. While laudable for setting noteworthy standards for what the work of an information professional should look like, students rarely experience direct engagement with best practices unless they take on internships, many unpaid. Wrought with ethical questions around the potential of financial exploitation, the unpaid internship nonetheless stands in as a supreme model of student skill-building both inside and outside of LIS programs (Malik, 2014) Further, when placed within internships (often at larger, university libraries and archives), students face systems of information building, sharing, and organizing set within previous administrative standards and cannot test the theories promoted within their archival education, if such education is even available (Cox et al., 2001). Ironically, few archives truly foster perfect best practices and rarely challenge interns to try new and innovative methods to attain such standards, instead setting specific practices internally. This inconsistency grows exponentially as media types expand and archives consist less and less of paper-only collections (Parker, et al., 2016). Simply, traditional cultural institutions retain proprietary practices unique to the respective institution and students find themselves learning to do things in a singular way that is difficult to replicate

outside of their specific internship. As a result, the expected skills of digital repository building, digital asset management, and robust documentation remain outside of the skill set of the recently LIS graduates. Rarely in a current system are notions of best practices complicated. Rarer still are frank discussions around how situational, contradictory, and objectively oriented such best practices are within individual institutions.

Coincidentally, community archives face similar challenges. Dealing with understaffing, outdated proprietary technology, self-taught archivists such spaces approach digital presence challenges through scalable alternatives. This 'by-any-means-necessary' approach runs oppositional to the best practices archival traditions (Caswell et al., 2017). Rhetorically this results in community archives becoming 'lesser archives' given their inability to achieve such standards. Thus, community archives remain spaces deemed non-valid within archival standardization and potentially become undesirable sites of learning for students desperately seeking out spaces of skill building alongside their degrees. More directly, students want a chance to apply in-class theories of archival praxis in new and radical ways and community archives desire methods with which to grow their collections digitally, while employing "radical user orientation" newly conceptualizing access within archival discussions (Huvila, 2008). As such, a space to explore new ways of understanding and building digital archives stands at this intersection and the manner in which the LIS classroom might serve such encounters remains critically underutilized.

METHODS

To address this challenge, Master's students at the University of South Carolina's School of Library and Information Sciences (Hereafter SLI) helped to build a digital repository for a burgeoning community archive within a graduate course. Currently known as Archiving South Carolina Women, the project aims to account for and make available digitally a history of the work of women's activism in South Carolina and, more broadly, The United States. Through reimagining a class that traditionally focused on design and management of digital images exclusively through theories for digital asset management, this undertaking reimagined how such a course looked from a Service Learning (SL) angle. SL, in its structure, focuses on allowing students to learn through praxis, with the classroom becoming a space where students are paired with community partners to help deal with a respective critical need, while, learning skills in the process. Programs commonly built with SL components tend to be those with clear ties to community engagement such as: public health, social work, and international studies. Since many students desire employment in public information sectors, SL easily mapped onto our SLIS courses, providing a chance to illuminate the often underappreciated role of community service within archival practice. Furthermore, as others have shown this pedagogical approach allowed us to navigate complex topics both concerning library praxis while accounting for the ethics of working with diverse communities a well (Wittbooi, 2004; Roy, 2009). The aforementioned Archiving South Carolina Women initiative was a community archive in desperate need of digital expansion and SLIS possessed students within a course that were hungry for hands on skills. The connection was incredibly easy to facilitate. In no small way, SL offered an opening for a new way to think about how LIS programs could aid community archives in a reciprocal manner.

FINDINGS

Both failures and successes were present from the initial planning on through the implementation of the digital repository. Since most of our students were previously grounded in best practices oriented approaches to digital repository building a redefinition of best practices occurred as they moved towards building a repository from scratch that was scalable, easily operable, and transferrable not only to the community partner (Archiving South Carolina Women) but to future students and volunteers as well. A general, qualitative analysis of student experiences suggest that students found the SL approach rewarding and information far more meaningful that their other course work, a sentiment echoed in both undergraduate and graduate participants. During the course students also came to have a deeper understanding of the technological side of the project management, noting how the long-term operability of the project, meant focusing on more open source approaches to repository building, which resulted in critical, and necessary, discussions about all levels of practice within cultural institutions. Student (and instructor) debates within the various courses included: ethics of cataloging standards, digital preservation standards, copyright, workflow management, and project documentation. Both the students and instructors found the initial topics to be deceptively easy, only to discover that each was riddled with nuance and complexity, especially when issues of funding and labor emerged. These challenges were amplified further by the express feminist nature of the project. Our community partner liaison made her ideas of what the collection should represent clear from the onset and the resulting product had to adhere to such philosophies, meaning that the students were also learning about a historically underrepresented group of people within South Carolina (and digital repositories) by working with activist women in Columbia, South Carolina. At multiple times throughout the semester, the group found itself engaging in conversations about diversity hiring within cultural institutions, the role of privileged narratives within archival history, and an incredibly illuminating discussion about web accessibility as it relates to digital repositories. While both instructors incorporated these ideas into their non-SL courses, it was the first time such discussions grew organically out of the direct work of students, not via pre-assigned discussion topics. In the end, students moved towards an approach to repository building that was transparent, while advocating for the highest degree of mutual beneficence possible. This expanded to include not only their community partner, but their classmates, the collection, and the collection's users as well. Furthermore, the project continues to grow within a SL environment and is currently being offered via an online course, which provides new and challenging discussions around the efficacy of teaching about the materiality of archival labor when faced with a digital barrier and the ability engage in complex political discussions when not looking at students in a face-to-face setting.

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