

Dartmouth College

## Dartmouth Digital Commons

---

Dartmouth Library Staff Publications

Dartmouth Library

---

12-2020

### Supporting Teaching with Primary Sources at Dartmouth College: A Report coordinated by Ithaka S+R

Morgan Swan

*Dartmouth College*, [Morgan.R.Swan@Dartmouth.edu](mailto:Morgan.R.Swan@Dartmouth.edu)

Myranda Fuentes

*Dartmouth College*, [myranda.a.fuentes@dartmouth.edu](mailto:myranda.a.fuentes@dartmouth.edu)

Daniel Abosso

*Dartmouth College*, [daniel.h.abosso@dartmouth.edu](mailto:daniel.h.abosso@dartmouth.edu)

Joshua Dacey

*Dartmouth College*, [joshua.dacey@dartmouth.edu](mailto:joshua.dacey@dartmouth.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.dartmouth.edu/dlstaffpubs>

 Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

---

#### Dartmouth Digital Commons Citation

Swan, Morgan; Fuentes, Myranda; Abosso, Daniel; and Dacey, Joshua, "Supporting Teaching with Primary Sources at Dartmouth College: A Report coordinated by Ithaka S+R" (2020). *Dartmouth Library Staff Publications*. 29.

<https://digitalcommons.dartmouth.edu/dlstaffpubs/29>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Dartmouth Library at Dartmouth Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dartmouth Library Staff Publications by an authorized administrator of Dartmouth Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [dartmouthdigitalcommons@groups.dartmouth.edu](mailto:dartmouthdigitalcommons@groups.dartmouth.edu).

# Supporting Teaching with Primary Sources at Dartmouth College: A Report coordinated by Ithaka S+R

Morgan Swan, Daniel Abosso, Myranda Fuentes, and Joshua Dacey; Dartmouth College Library

In 2019-20, Dartmouth College Library was invited to participate in an international study coordinated by Ithaka S+R that is an exploratory examination of the pedagogical practices of humanities and social sciences instructors teaching with primary sources at the undergraduate level. The goal of the study is to understand instructors' teaching practices toward developing library-wide resources and services to support them in their work. The study contributes to the wider field of library and information studies, information literacy pedagogy, and the scholarship of teaching and learning in the humanities, within the context of the evolving relationship between libraries and undergraduate teaching support. Finally, the study intends to offer recommendations for library support to this group of educators based on knowledge developed through the project. Note that the majority of this study was conducted prior to the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has underscored and accelerated the need for remotely accessible tools and materials. This unexpected shift has challenged the library both to deliver digital primary source content and tools and to provide library-based support for off-site classes. However, it also has provided an opportunity for the library to re-envision its programmatic approach to digital content and delivery for the classroom environment.

The study is a part of a larger project by Ithaka S+R that will be based on the analysis of semi-structured interviews conducted at Dartmouth College and twenty-five other participating institutions: Bowling Green State University, Brandeis University, Brigham Young University, Brown University, California State University at Northridge, Illinois Wesleyan University, Indiana University at Bloomington, Johns Hopkins University, Lafayette College, Northern Michigan University, Pennsylvania State University, Princeton University, Texas A&M University, University of Arizona, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, University of Kentucky, University of Miami, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, University of Pittsburgh, University of Sheffield, University of Southampton, University of Virginia, Washington and Lee University, Williams College, and Yale University. As intended for the reports from the other twenty-five participants, Dartmouth College's report was submitted to Ithaka S+R. From these twenty-six local contributions, Ithaka S+R will prepare a comprehensive report for release in early 2021.

Both comprehensive and local reports will be openly available via the Ithaka S+R website.

## **Dartmouth College Library's contribution to the Ithaka S+R Project**

The four librarians responsible for this project undertook interviews of varying lengths (usually between 40 and 70 minutes) with twelve instructors involved in teaching with primary sources from various personal, professional, and disciplinary or interdisciplinary perspectives. The instructors are also varied in terms of their positions and experience in the academy; our interview pool had two lecturers, one senior lecturer, three assistant instructors, four associate instructors, and two full instructors. Six departments in the humanities were represented: Classics; English; History; Sociology; Theater; and Writing. Of the twelve faculty, three were cross-listed with other areas of study in the Arts & Sciences: Native American Studies; Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies; and African and African American Studies. What follows derives from our interviews with these twelve educators, but the interpretations and characterizations remain those of the Dartmouth College Library research team solely.

## **Methodology**

The balance of this report summarizes our findings. Three general themes articulate its significant headings, two of which have several sub-themes:

- Primary Source Materials
- Philosophy of Teaching with Primary Sources
- Course Design & Instruction

We determined these themes through extensive analysis of recorded interviews with our twelve participants. The interview questions loosely followed a format provided by the Ithaka S+R program for informal interview settings. From the digital audio recordings, a professional service created twelve transcripts that were anonymized to protect interviewee privacy.<sup>1</sup> After individual study and coding of each transcript, we convened and collaborated to organize our thoughts into themes. Each of us then selected one of three themes to focus on for this report. These individual contributions were assembled

---

<sup>1</sup> Whenever an interviewee is cited in this report, the quotation is followed by a number that was randomly assigned to each respondent to preserve anonymity but also allow for a better sense of the relative use of the interview content throughout the report.

and revised by one team member, and the resultant draft was reviewed and revised by the entire team before submitting a final draft to Ithaca S+R.

## **Materials**

Instructors select and use primary sources in their teaching mostly based on their own experience and partly in collaboration with other faculty, librarians, and students. Most use both physical objects and digital facsimiles in their classes. Among those interviewed, many instructors collaborate with special collections librarians, often having the latter choose the primary sources and lead classes at the special collections library. Some instructors refer students to the library catalog and main stacks; others use departmental or private materials in their classes. Digital databases and search engines like Google Scholar are also important sources and tools for instructors, but their comfort level with these varies, and some are skeptical of their students' reliance on digital sources alone.

Nearly all instructors we interviewed use digital facsimiles found online either through databases (broadly defined) or search engines. Four instructors mentioned that they used the library catalog to find primary sources, but it was not always clear if they meant that they use the library catalog itself or the databases found through the library catalog. Those interviewed do not seem to consider items in the main library stacks to be primary sources for their pedagogical aims and choose instead to use and have their students use the special collections library.

Most of the instructors interviewed rely greatly upon primary source materials that are in special collections and on the expertise of the special collections librarians to choose those sources. Special collections librarians often lead classes using these materials. Two interviewees mentioned that subject librarians help them or their students to find primary sources, while several mentioned using the catalog and the stacks. Some instructors make use of primary sources owned by their department or housed in campus or local museums. Instructors also use primary sources or their own private sources, as in the case of an instructor who uses a nearby cemetery and their personal coin collection as primary sources.

Using physical primary sources allows instructors to filter the number of primary sources with which their students work. One instructor, noting that students often run into problems finding and working with primary sources online, helped create a digital archive: "I wanted my students to go and look at his primary documents and they were like scattered everywhere and the students were coming back and saying they're hard to find and how do I get to them. Part of the impetus was to somehow get them all

together, to catalog them in some centralized place.” This same instructor worked on a second digital project because of her desire to present primary sources without an editor’s decisions. [12] Another instructor had her students use Scalar to work on a primary source in special collections. [8] These digital humanities projects show how primary sources can be used by students and faculty alike to learn about the primary sources and to present them to others. “[I]t’s sort of two different publishing sort of things, two different audiences,” as one interviewee said. [8]

Some instructors, however, are concerned about using online primary sources because they often lack full transcriptions (e.g. of marginalia) or other contextual features. The use of keyword searches in larger digital surrogates, in particular, made some respondents concerned that students would lose the larger contextualization of the entire source as an entire and complete object or work. As one interviewee put it:

“If you use a search term, that gets you to the term. You take the bit that you want from the document, you haven’t read the whole document. And that’s unfortunate, right. Because those words, that text exists in the context of that whole document. And...you do a search and it comes up and says...4,698 items. Like you’re not going to read the whole document in each case, right?” [2]

Similarly, most of the interviewees cited pedagogical challenges based specifically upon the preponderance of digital surrogates and born-digital primary sources and their use by undergraduates. The continually changing and improving nature of digital or digitized content was also a cause for concern, whether because of the potential difficulty in locating newly accessible materials, navigating non-intuitive discovery tools, or a misplaced confidence in conducting a comprehensive search because of poor or faulty search techniques.

But most interviewees also noted the benefits of using digital primary sources. Some interviewees said that students use online search engines and find primary sources they did not even know existed and/or are online. As one older instructor said:

I have found from reading student papers that there are sources online that I didn’t know were online. Oh, I don’t have to travel to Kansas? [T]his is their world much more than mine. [I]’ll often provide students links, but they’ve often found links...for me. [2]

In general, the early-career instructors seem more comfortable using digital as well as physical primary sources, but they, too, still want their students to have the “library experience.” As one instructor puts it, “large portions of [a primary source] are now

accessible online but I recommend that they have access to the bound volumes that we have in our stacks in the library because sometimes a shelf search serendipitously generates stuff that we don't even know to look for." [3]

## **Philosophy of Teaching with Primary Sources**

### Faculty Training

Our twelve interviewees all came from different educational backgrounds and therefore learned how to teach with primary sources in a number of different ways. Very few of them cited any sort of formal instruction early on in their careers, although several interviewees referenced graduate-school-level methodology courses as their first exposure to primary sources. Most of the instructors cited their own personal research experiences as informing their understanding of how to engage with and utilize primary sources; this hands-on learning was typically conducted during their independent pursuit of an advanced degree in their field. Often, then, the instructor's field of study placed expectations upon them with regard to the use of primary sources. They then brought those expectations with them into a classroom environment as instructors.

When questioned about how they developed their own pedagogical approach to teaching with primary sources, several interviewees indicated that they made use of institutional resources such as the Dartmouth Center for the Advancement of Learning (DCAL), which provides faculty with teaching support. One respondent referred to her experience with a non-institutional program run by the Folger Shakespeare Library, which partnered with her graduate school department to provide her with specialized training in exchange for course credit.

Every interviewee credited special collections librarians and archivists on campus with conceptualizing how to put primary sources to work for them in the classroom. Sometimes they experienced this librarian-modeled instruction during their undergraduate or graduate education, but many more signaled that they learned through collaborating with librarians and archivists within the context of teaching their own courses. One of the strongest thematic threads throughout all twelve interviews, in fact, was the emphasis on the high value of special collections librarians and archivists with regard to primary source course integration and primary source literacy instruction<sup>2</sup>.

---

<sup>2</sup> For more on libraries and primary source literacy instruction, see "Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy," ACRL RBMS-SAA Joint Task Force on the Development of Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy, 2018.

<http://www.ala.org/acrl/sites/ala.org.acrl/files/content/standards/Primary%20Source%20Literacy2018.pdf>.

A significant number of respondents indicated that their understanding of how to teach with primary sources came primarily through their own self-education, whether by reading all that they could on the topic or by using their classes as experimental labs where they could try out different methodologies. One interviewee indicated his awareness of the lack of formal primary source pedagogical training in academia by stating that he was “very lucky” [3] to have attended an undergraduate institution that provided that type of education. However, the same individual also emphasized that there was no substitute for experience when learning how to teach with primary sources.

### Value of Teaching with Primary Sources

All of the instructors who were interviewed underscored the importance of letting students have hands-on experience with primary sources. One interviewee cited the importance of the sense of excitement that comes from the act of discovery, and a second faculty member echoed that sentiment, saying, “the objects have an aura for the students that all of them...get really excited about.” [5] Another instructor indicated that a didactic model of teaching with primary sources was not really worth the time spent in special collections. Instead, she and others highly valued the ability of students to engage with the sources more than just visually: “[I]n a show and tell the interaction is all visual. And if you’re going to work with primary materials, I think you need to be able to touch them and turn them over, smell them.” [4]

Another respondent said that one of their goals in having students engage with primary sources was to inspire them to go on and take more classes in their given discipline.[8] Because of the value of direct engagement for students, instructors also indicated that having smaller class sizes was integral to providing the best experience possible for their students. The concept of user-driven research, or letting the students select topics and materials of interest to them, was also mentioned.

Student engagement with primary sources was of particular importance to instructors whose academic disciplines relied upon a certain level of primary source literacy, especially up and against the use of secondary sources. The fields of history and sociology, in particular, require their practitioners to have facility with archival research. A key component of this ability, according to at least one educator, is to be able to see beyond the secondary sources on a particular topic and to examine and interpret the primary sources that contributed to its construction:

“[W]hen we engage [with] undergraduate students we first have to establish with them that the secondary sources that they’re reading have an evidentiary base. One of the first teaching objectives with undergraduates is to get them to see

beyond the finished product of historical research and look at the architecture of those arguments and to look at the foundations of those arguments in evidence.” [3]

The instructor indicated that he had two goals for his students when teaching with primary sources: “To get them to understand that for historians, at least, arguments are based on imperfect, partial evidence and, secondary, for them to actually interrogate that evidence for themselves. To see it as qualitatively distinct from the finished product of a monograph, or articles.” [3]

Another instructor believed that the introduction of competing narratives via the examination of primary sources is of immediate value for undergraduate classes, as it stimulates discussion or debate that doesn’t usually take place when students are only presented with a traditional prevailing narrative that is often deliberately constructed by secondary sources. Moreover, it prompts students to “empathize” with non-intuitive and sometimes competing perspectives and “to try to decode things, to try to find patterns in primary sources.” [9] A different interviewee shared this same sentiment about student exposure to competing narratives, saying that she wanted the students “to understand that there are other perspectives as well that are valid in the way we communicate with each other, and share those perspectives.” [10]

This belief was echoed by other interviewees, who wanted their students to develop their own ideas without any intermediary opinions. One instructor stated that they felt their job was to help students “figure things out” instead of just telling them the answer or lecturing at them. [6] Direct engagement with primary sources was a key method for making that happen. Among other benefits, using primary sources to teach students allowed them to hone their critical thinking skills and their ability to evaluate ideas and concepts, not just within any particular class but also in whatever life situation they might find themselves. One instructor offered a caveat, however, when considering how to integrate primary sources into a class: “[H]ave a clear sense of exactly what the source or the activity using the source is intending to accomplish in the larger context of the class. And not simply, ‘Oh I need some primary sources here’”. [9]

Another benefit that teaching with primary sources affords students is the potential to discover new concepts, ideas, and information. The ability to evaluate a primary source critically, especially if the creator of the source claims a certain level of objectivity, was a skill that instructors highly valued. One interviewee made this point when speaking about government documents: “They should be authentic, they should be authoritative, and they should be trustworthy. And they're not.” The instructor wanted for students to learn to ask, “Who wrote this? Why did they write it, and [for] what purposes?” [2]



With regard to civic engagement, the point was made that student access to the primary sources created by marginalized or underrepresented people could have a huge impact on cultural hegemony in the future: “[O]ur goal is to overhaul curriculum as well as industry practice simultaneously. And so part of that is centralizing cultural worldview as the core value of how we teach. Because it accounts for the humanity of everyone, and not just the centering of whiteness and Eurocentric ideas and philosophies.” [10]

## Pedagogical Challenges

Despite the positive value that teaching with special collections provides for undergraduate students, all of the interviewees acknowledged that there were numerous challenges that it also presents.

One challenge is how to overcome students’ hesitancy to enter a special collections or archival facility and ask for help. One easy solution was the involvement of special collections librarians and archivists as collaborators in the teaching session, which was intentionally held on-site and not remotely using digital surrogates. Doing this allowed for a relational connection with students and library professionals who could assist them with their own research projects in future.

Student assumptions or misconceptions about how to evaluate and interpret a primary source were also a concern. Instructors noted that students who weren’t familiar with how to approach primary sources might be tempted to do so in much the same manner that they would a secondary or even tertiary source – giving the text a cursory pass-over without asking deeper questions about concepts like motive and audience.

Another skills-based challenge that instructors mentioned was the need for students to be able to contextualize materials adequately: “The biggest challenge is just to get [the students] to understand what [the primary sources] are.” [6] When students weren’t able to understand how a particular source was situated within its larger cultural context, or whether the tone was satirical or earnest, it could potentially lead to a consequential misinterpretation of the text and therefore the cultural context. One suggestion offered by a respondent was to locate primary sources that had accompanying secondary sources or creator commentary that helped students orient the primary sources that they were examining. Instructors felt that the challenge of adequate contextualization was especially precarious with the introduction of digital primary sources.

Other challenges were purely practical ones. Sometimes the size of the class and the length of time allotted to a particular primary source exploration session weren’t conducive either to a truly thorough examination of the text or to the transmission of

core concepts. At times, issues such as limited knowledge of foreign languages or paleographical skills also caused complications when teaching with primary sources. Another practical hurdle that was mentioned was the need to secure administrative and institutional support for teaching with primary sources. One respondent stated that the real challenge was “convincing administrations, library and institutional, that it is worth investing in staff support for that kind of teaching and in keeping materials on campus. Because there has to be the immediacy of access and that’s a big challenge. Because more and more places are shipping more and more of their collections away.” [4]

The lack of representation of certain traditionally marginalized or underrepresented people groups was also a concern. One instructor pointed out that the sorts of primary sources that institutions have preserved historically are usually ones that tell the story of those who are in power. As he said, “Certain types of documents are well represented in collections because the survival rates of those documents. So, we have in many collections certain types of documents that are privileged from the point of view of what the students are able to see. Institutionalized documents, things that are generated by the state, these are the things that tend to survive.” [3]

Access to relevant or appropriate primary sources was also seen as a potential difficulty. While some instructors felt that the resources available at the college were an embarrassment of riches, others indicated that they didn’t have access to the sorts of materials that would really make on-site teaching with primary sources feasible. In this context, increased digitization of primary sources would be a positive development but the labor involved with digitization could be cost-prohibitive for most institutions.

## **Course Design & Instruction**

In order to better support our instructors teaching with primary sources, it is important for the library to understand both the varied pedagogical goals for using primary source material across disciplines and the ways in which these aims are realized or approximated in actual course design and instruction. Although the distinction between these two concepts may appear small, uncovering where instruction with primary sources falls short of our instructors’ pedagogical ideals or how pedagogical goals could be more easily achieved with different methods of teaching with primary sources is critical to identifying exactly what supports are needed.

### **The Dartmouth Environment**

Several instructors describe Dartmouth as having an environment conducive to creative or experimental course design; teaching with primary sources is generally viewed as a way to affect such design. While some instructors cite the undergraduate teaching

mission at Dartmouth as a factor in creating this environment, most point to the ten-week quarter system as a constraint necessitating creativity in course design. This idea is best summed up by a theater instructor:

“[P]art of it was, again, coming from a semester system into a quarter system and you’re going to have to change. I literally could not just teach my same classes the same way I taught them because of the structure. So again, instead of looking at [the quarter system] as a liability or a negative thing... [it’s] an opportunity to reconfigure what I’ve already been doing, so what would you do differently? Or how would you do it and what resources are available?” [10]

For those instructors in disciplines that are not dependent on consultation of primary sources, as above, designing classes for a quarter system encourages teaching with primary sources as an exercise of pedagogical creativity in itself. On the other hand, for educators in disciplines that unavoidably engage with primary sources (e.g. history and archaeology), the crux of the quarter system is designing assignments grounded in primary source analysis and interpretation that are not traditional research papers students develop over the course of five or six weeks. Additionally, there is mild anxiety among interviewees to come up with increasingly diverse, engaging methods of teaching with primary sources to attract students of diverse ways of thinking and skill sets to their courses and academic departments.

In either case, Dartmouth instructors are positioned to be receptive to outside input and support when it comes to developing new courses and re-designing others. An instructor who describes pushback from colleagues about integrating teaching with primary sources into their courses has not felt discouraged from continuing their work and expressed willingness to “convert” new colleagues: “I have to convert them... I wouldn’t worry about it, as long as they weren’t hostile to it. I would feel like I could convert them.” [8]

## Student-Centered Learning in Practice

The most universal sentiment conveyed in all our interviews was a general distaste for “one-sided” rote learning and a preference for designing active, student-centered learning experiences. The instructors see teaching with primary sources as an easy way to stimulate student interest and active participation in class, whether the primary sources in question are accessed using on-site repositories, textbooks, or digital environments. An English instructor who teaches a seminar class directly in the college’s special collections library asserts that they are “not a fan of show and tell” because of “the interaction that doesn’t happen.” [4] Similarly, a history instructor that uses facsimiles and published collections of primary sources in the classroom describes

how incorporating these sources helps students navigate complex situations “where there are no good choices” in history: “[I]f I tell them that that’s one thing. But if they get into that and are arguing that with somebody else... in their dorm, you know, that’s a whole different level of it.” [2]

A simple strategy for active learning with primary sources is to model interpretation of primary sources or discovery of primary sources to undergraduates before giving students assignments that require them to interpret or find different primary sources on their own. As an English instructor explains: “[I]t’s not that [students] don’t know what to do with [a primary source] once they have it. It’s more that they don’t know what to look for necessarily.” [5] For some instructors, especially those with larger classes, modeling is achieved by highlighting one or two carefully selected primary sources (including excerpts) in a lecture setting, or by assigning secondary readings that use the same primary sources to come to disparate conclusions. In both cases, the ensuing class discussion illustrates how to critically engage with primary materials without necessarily taking up much class time.

Our instructors also favored designing assignments grounded in (near-)contextless interactions with primary sources. These learning exercises force students to formulate their own questions and consult their instructor for guidance as needed, and students become more expert users of primary sources and/or develop a deeper understanding of the range of materials considered primary sources by the experience itself. A popular experiential learning assignment among instructors across disciplines is exhibition curation for both physical spaces (e.g., Dartmouth Library cases, public library displays, and natural history museum galleries) and digital environments (e.g., Omeka and Scalar). The precedent for and success of digital exhibition curation in course design creates an opportunity for the library to offer instructors accustomed to physical exhibition curation an alternative when spaces are unusable, such as during the current COVID-19 pandemic or when gallery space is in high demand.

Although a rarer practice, some of our instructors discuss working with students as co-designers of their courses in real time, as opposed to having only an ex post facto influence on future iterations of the course through student evaluations. A mild example of student control over course direction comes from a Classics instructor’s weekly assignment that requires students to generate “curiosity questions” based on readings, research those questions throughout the week, and present answers to those questions for the first half of class at the end of the week. They describe the efficacy of the assignment as follows: “People tend to learn better if they’re learning what they choose to learn... I suspect they listen to each other perhaps better than they listen to me, which is all good.” [6]

An English instructor describes courses in which students directly influenced both course content and structure:

“[A colleague in the English department] taught me about backward design so I’m in the know about that. In these two classes, I set questions for the students. I said, this is my goal for the course... And then I said here are some of the ways we can get there. How do you want to organize the course? I mean, I knew what I kind of wanted in the course. I said, how do you want to do it? We spent the first week or two just how do we want to do that? I adopted their recommendations.” [12]

## Collaborative Teaching

Our interviews reflected faculty receptiveness or even enthusiasm for collaborative course design or instruction with primary sources. Common collaborators include Dartmouth Library subject specialty and special collections librarians, staff at the Hood Museum of Art, and fellow faculty members. Instructors mentioned collaboration with staff at the Book Arts Workshop and the Donald Claflin Jewelry Studio in the Hopkins Center for the Arts for classes that require students to develop deeper understanding related to the processes by which primary sources are (or were) constructed. The Dartmouth Center for the Advancement of Learning (DCAL) and recommendations from departmental colleagues connected faculty with their collaborators most often, although certain instructors, especially early Americanists and early modernists, explained that special collections librarians were either directly involved in their interview process or were otherwise mentioned as a potential resource before teaching at Dartmouth.

Although pedagogical aims and methods vary across disciplines, interviewees tended to agree that “there is something to be said for just getting [undergraduates] in a different space.” [2] That said, none of the instructors interviewed are solely responsible for designing class sessions held in different locations on campus. Even when on-location collaborators offer no formal or direct instruction with students, they have at least partial input in curating the primary sources for the class session. As collaborators, librarians tend to take the lead in selecting primary sources and designing the class session itself, a practice best typified by a writing instructor: “They find the stuff and all we do [is] show up and handle it, and examine it, and come up with ideas about it.” [1] When teaching with a librarian does not involve use of a different space for the class session, librarians still assume a leading role in instruction for that class period, as illustrated by the comments of another educator:

“Sometimes students come up with some pretty wildly ambitious ideas that they want to research, and [the subject librarian for history has] been very patient and very helpful with them finding sources and then helping them craft alternatives when the question they have—I’m very grateful to have those relationships here.” [11]

Many instructors reveal a preference for deferring to librarians and archivists when teaching with primary sources because library staff demonstrate explicit interest in primary source pedagogy and building relationships with instructors:

“I’m happy to defer; I don’t need to tout my own expertise about things because I really learned a lot and I feel like there’s a lot more thought among the library staff here... about how to work with students and instructors than maybe some of the other places where those resources were there, but maybe not the networks as well developed.” [11]

Similarly, instructors find librarians and archivists willing and able to walk students through the “close work” necessary for interpreting primary sources or deciphering paleography that “I would just not have the patience to do,” in the words of a history instructor. They continue:

“[The college archivist] would just have them each one read a sentence or two sentences, say “what do you think that means?”...But I think that’s a very effective way of getting the students to—it’s not like reading a historian, you’re reading a document. And so you need to think carefully about the words, don’t assume that the words that they use have the same meaning then as they do now and all of those kinds of things.” [2]

Several instructors note that Dartmouth librarians have also been instrumental in helping them re-develop legacy courses or completely co-develop courses related to subject matter in their discipline that is not their area of expertise. A popular solution to the challenge of designing a course outside of one’s own academic wheelhouse has been to consult special collections librarians about relevant primary source materials and center the course around repeat visits to special collections to interact with those materials. An instructor of history who co-designed a course using this method explains that the course had to be constructed with a thematically narrow framework and more expansive chronology, which “opened up a lot of possibilities for making use of the collection.” The same instructor goes on to reflect that “[Dartmouth] is the first place where we’ve actually been able to treat special collections as a classroom... [B]eing

able to bring students physically into the collection has refined even further my skill set in working with [undergraduate] students.” [3]

## Instruction with Digital Tools & Materials

Although many of our instructors were willing to acknowledge that digital tools and materials have curricular benefits, their actual lesson plans revealed pedagogical outlooks that generally ranged from value neutral to completely dismissive. Educator imagination in this area rarely extends beyond the use of scans and photographs of primary sources as comparatively inferior surrogates for the originals. Many instructors hold assumptions as to the information that is lost engaging with primary sources in digital contexts, mostly related to materiality and marginalia, and routinely undervalue or outright refuse to use digital sources in their classes as a result.

One or two of our instructors have used digital platforms to facilitate exhibition curation activities with primary sources, but a much larger number of educators who incorporate curation assignments into their courses only have experience with physical gallery spaces. Interestingly, until recently, both instructors and special collections librarians seem not to consider digital exhibitions as possible alternatives when gallery spaces are in high demand. [5]

Indifferent or negative attitudes about digital tools or materials may come down to the work that needs to be done to properly orient undergraduates to whichever digital archive or platform is being used to access or engage with primary sources. An English instructor who self-describes as never using digital sources talks about “moving to [Early English Books Online] and how to use EEBO would be a whole set of issues;” their first and primary concern is not necessarily digitized primary sources, but instruction on “how to use EEBO.” [4] While this instructor may be skeptical of the efficacy of digitization and microfilm writ large, based on their ensuing recollection of critical scholarly discourse, they are not averse to all things digital. In their course embedded in special collections, they encourage students to use the special collections library blog to search for materials outside of the relatively narrow constraints of catalog metadata fields and require students to create similar posts about different primary sources as course assignments.

Although there are contexts in which working with primary sources on-site will be preferable to digital tools or materials, alternatives are needed in times when digital environments are the only teaching environments at one’s disposal, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. A departmental colleague of this more digitally skeptical instructor designed a course with their students to build an undergraduate-intuitive digital project featuring primary sources and contextualizing media. The idea of constructing a digital

environment to suit one's own unique needs could be a good way of framing course design for those faculty who are more familiar with the shortcomings--real or imagined--of digitized primary sources or digital humanities projects.

## Recommendations

Throughout this report, we have pinpointed many challenges that instructors have noted about teaching with primary sources. There are several areas where we anticipate the library contributing to this practice as we develop a deeper understanding of their needs. Below are listed several areas in which we recommend the library take a leadership role in its support of curricular engagement with primary sources. We have arranged our recommendations according to whether we believe that they can be implemented immediately or as a part of a longer-term institutional approach.

### Recommended for Immediate Action

- Fast-track the digitization of primary sources in our collections that have the greatest potential for global as well as institutional classroom use and increase the dedicated resources that are needed to do so.
- During class sessions that are held in a special collections environment, emphasize instruction on how to contextualize, evaluate, and interpret primary source materials.
- Continue emphasizing librarian integration into higher-level courses whenever possible for the purpose of orienting students to available resources.
- Communicate regularly with instructors or review the course catalog before the start of each term to see which courses beyond the ones already using primary sources might be good candidates for library primary source integration.

### Recommended for Long-Term Planning

- Create more opportunities for developing increasingly diverse methods of teaching with primary sources by focusing collections development efforts on primary sources that have been created by traditionally marginalized peoples and groups.
- Develop a programmatic effort to orient instructors and students to the discovery tools for primary sources that we have available for all levels of research and learning.
- Work with the on-campus faculty teaching center to provide more education for instructors on how to integrate primary sources (including



digital primary sources) into their courses, especially when a large class size becomes a hindrance to on-site engagement.

- Brainstorm with instructors who currently teach with primary sources about how their departmental peers who do not teach with primary sources might be won over by peer instruction or recommendation.
- Develop a centralized digital repository to gather faculty-curated digital primary source materials together for collective institutional access and use.

## Conclusions

At the onset of this project, we suspected that Dartmouth College Library was already contributing to the curricular integration of primary sources, both through our special collections and archival holdings as well as via access to valuable digital resources. Our suspicions were confirmed by every one of our interviewees, who credited the Library with substantial contributions to their discovery of appropriate materials, their conceptualization of their pedagogical approach to teaching with primary sources, and the nuts and bolts of actual course design.

Despite the successful support that Dartmouth College Library has offered to instructors so far, there are also many opportunities for us to expand our collaboration with educators, primarily with regards to the discovery, access, and integration of digital resources into the curriculum. The COVID-19 pandemic, in particular, has had a significant impact on how teaching with primary sources now occurs. On-site classes have vanished out of necessity, but there has been an increase in support for virtual class sessions. A few examples of this support are on-demand scans made from primary sources and uploaded to learning management systems (e.g., Canvas or Blackboard), pre-recorded videos by librarians that provide instruction on how to discover or engage with primary sources (both generally and with regard to specific items), worksheets tailored to specific groupings of digitized materials, virtual assistance with online student-curated exhibits, and enabling professors to stream their online synchronous class sessions from the library itself while using actual primary source materials.

Despite these on-the-fly adjustments, the pandemic has exposed the reality that libraries need to make a greater commitment to providing digital tools and primary source materials for instructors if they wish to remain relevant as a partner in teaching with primary source materials.