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## Mind the Gap: Teaching Archival Silences in Digital Collections

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CASE #19

# Mind the Gap: Teaching Archival Silences in Digital Collections

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES ENGAGED FROM [GUIDELINES FOR PRIMARY SOURCE LITERACY](#) BY THIS CASE STUDY

- 2.B. Use appropriate, efficient, and effective search strategies in order to locate primary sources. Be familiar with the most common ways primary sources are described, such as catalog records and archival finding aids.
- 2.D. Understand that historical records may never have existed, may not have survived, or may not be collected and/or publicly accessible. Existing records may have been shaped by the selectivity and mediation of individuals such as collectors, archivists, librarians, donors, and/or publishers, potentially limiting the sources available for research.
- 2.E. Recognize and understand the policies and procedures that affect access to primary sources, and that these differ across repositories, databases, and collections.

CASE STUDY LOCATION Trinity University  
San Antonio, TX  
<https://www.trinity.edu/>

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## Introduction and Institutional Context

This case study describes a library instruction session held via Zoom for undergraduate students in an upper-level history course, U.S. Foreign Relations. Working collaboratively, the special collections librarian and the instruction librarian for history presented students with strategies for finding and evaluating digital primary sources for their research papers. This lesson engages learning objectives 2.B. (Use appropriate, efficient, and effective search strategies . . .), 2.D. (Understand that historical records . . . may not be collected and/or publicly accessible . . .), and 2.E. (Recognize and understand the policies and procedures . . .).

Trinity is a highly selective private liberal arts university in San Antonio, Texas, with an undergraduate enrollment of about 2,500 students. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the school implemented three instruction modes for the 2020–2021 academic year: courses were offered in-person, remotely, or via “TigerFlex,” a hybrid of the two and named for the university’s mascot. Students were allowed to attend classes either on campus or remotely. Library instruction sessions, in turn, took different forms, with a mix of in-person instruction, Zoom sessions with in-person classes, and fully online classes. Librarians also created substantial asynchronous materials to support the hybrid model.

In previous years, students in U.S. Foreign Relations had visited Special Collections and Archives to explore manuscript materials related to course contents. The session took place early in the semester, before students began work on a major research paper which required the use of primary sources. The learning objective in these past iterations most closely aligned with 5.A. of the *Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy* (Examine and synthesize a variety of sources in order to construct, support, or dispute a research argument). Students were given the opportunity to handle archival photographs, postcards, newspapers, pamphlets, correspondence, and manuscripts related to American foreign policy. The session ended with an overview of strategies for finding digitized primary sources online, as many students had devised research paper topics that fell outside the collecting scope of the library’s Special Collections.

In the fall of 2020, U.S. Foreign Relations was offered as a fully synchronous online course, including the library instruction session. For some other classes, the special collections librarian was able to replicate, through digitization, the experience of examining manuscripts in-person, but several constraints made such an effort impossible for U.S. Foreign Relations. Much of the material typically used in this class was under copyright or had privacy restrictions. Furthermore, the special collections librarian, who was primarily working from home, had limited access to the library building, making it difficult to scan lengthy items like pamphlets and newspapers.

These constraints engendered creative thinking, as constraints often do. Revising a well-worn lesson plan revealed opportunities to incorporate Learning Objectives 2.D. and 2.E. Where the traditional instruction session was too often show-and-tell, albeit with a hands-on component, the revised class would emphasize the curatorial decisions that shape digital collections, providing students a richer context by which to evaluate online primary sources during their own research. The new lesson plan also fostered collaboration between the special collections librarian and instruction librarian for history, leveraging each of their skill sets. Now, students would be introduced to primary sources while developing the ability to locate such sources in support of their arguments.

## Narrative

Prior to the instruction session, the special collections librarian created two new digital collections on the library's CONTENTdm page: [a collection of photographs](#) from the Spanish-American War, and subsequent American occupation of Cuba, and [a sampling of historic pamphlets](#) from several collections, limited to shorter items in the public domain. Additional pamphlets under copyright protection were also scanned and collected in a Google Drive folder restricted to members of the class. The special collections librarian also identified an existing digital collection relevant to the topic of U.S. Foreign Relations.

These collections were shared with the class via a LibGuide ahead of the instruction session. Students were instructed to spend twenty minutes exploring materials in the digital collections. As proof of participation, they were also asked to identify a favorite item and post it to a Padlet board created for the class.

The special collections librarian began the seventy-five-minute Zoom session by providing an overview of Special Collections and Archives, namely the kinds of materials collected by the unit and policies that manage their access and handling. She also invited on-campus students to schedule an appointment to view materials in person. Turning to the Padlet activity, the special collections librarian asked students to share any initial reactions they had from reviewing the digital collections; students who had not completed the pre-class assignment used this time to quickly examine the materials.

From there, the special collections librarian guided the students through a discussion of the kinds of materials in the digital collections. Students observed that the materials were old, image-heavy (versus text-centric), and only covered a few topics. One student noted that the pamphlets shared via Google Drive were much newer than those on the public CONTENTdm page. This provided an opportunity for the special collections librarian to teach the students about the curatorial process behind the creation of digital collections, including factors such as copyright concerns, site traffic (higher for images versus text), limited storage space, and the labor behind digitizing lengthy or fragile documents. She explained how the materials that this class would normally view in the reading room were much more extensive, highlighting that digital collections frequently contain only a portion of the materials in a full archival collection.

The special collections librarian also highlighted the role of curatorial bias: digital collections often reflect the prejudices and interests of the person who selected the materials to be digitized. In some cases, this can mean less material in digital collections from underrepresented groups. She shared an anecdote from her own experience to demonstrate the ways that bias, or even simple preference, can impact curatorial practices. She would never have chosen to digitize the collection of photographs from the Spanish-American War, for example, had the instructor not requested it. Why? Because military history holds little personal interest for her. She emphasized that every digital collection of primary sources is subject to decisions and preferences such as this one, and that biases—even innocuous ones—influence curatorial choices.

The focus then moved from primary sources held by Trinity's Special Collections to primary sources found in the library's subscription databases and around the web. Before delving into these databases, however, the instruction librarian shared a page from the bibliography of the course instructor's recently published monograph. The instruction librarian had two reasons for doing so: to demonstrate, per backward design, the desired outcomes of the research process in a concrete and memorable way;

and to give the course instructor an opportunity to comment on the laborious process of making true statements about the past, how events unfurled and why. The instruction librarian then asked students to peruse the bibliography, paying particular attention to the kinds of sources consulted by the author. He asked students to note their sheer diversity, ranging from personal papers to the pages of a popular magazine. He wished to demonstrate the myriad kinds of primary sources that a historian brings to her craft, the often surprising sources of viewpoint diversity and corroboration. Moreover, he wished to challenge the binary thinking that some students bring to complex research papers of the kind found in upper-division courses, an artifact of well-meaning but simplistic instruction that divides information into scholarly and non-scholarly sources.

Following this brief exercise, the instruction librarian shared a course-specific LibGuide with the students. Organized roughly by genre (e.g., government documents, historical newspapers), the guide brings together many of the sources most likely to help students construct a credible interpretation of the facts undergirding their research questions. No guide could anticipate the information needs of all students, given the wide range of research topics they had selected. Attempting to do so would succeed only in overwhelming students, paralyzing them with page upon page of possibilities. Rather than attempting a quixotic comprehensiveness, the guide was designed to maximize self-guided discovery while introducing students to essential resources such as the *Foreign Relations of the United States* and the *Digital National Security Archive*.

Building upon the first half of the session, the instruction librarian shared strategies for finding digital collections of primary sources, similar to the ones prepared by the special collections librarian. The discussion emphasized the decentralized nature of primary source collections on the internet. He met students where they were, as practiced Google searchers, and shared ways to pair keywords like “archives” or “primary sources” with search terms derived from one’s topic. The key, he stressed, was that conceptualization should structure one’s search strategy. Creating a keyword inventory populated with terms derived from one’s topic would help students seek sources with clarity and confidence, rather than haphazardly scrolling through pages of irrelevant and therefore confidence-sapping results. Thinking about their information needs—What do I know about this topic? What evidence do I need in order to say that something is true? Who is likely to have created, preserved, or published such information?—would help them identify missing evidence, gaps in their understanding, or logical weaknesses.

Nothing helps students master these skills like active practice. Accordingly, the instruction librarian kept his remarks succinct in order to give students time to complete a simple worksheet (see Appendix 1). The goal was that students should leave class with one source in hand, or at least greater confidence in the viability of their topics.

Under normal circumstances, the librarian and the professor would then amiably patrol the classroom, prompting questions from students and providing guide-by-side assistance. Alas, such activities translate poorly to Zoom, and students had too little time to complete the worksheet. Only a few students advanced past the first question, and it was difficult to assess their ability to implement the search strategies to which they had been introduced.

Another challenge the instruction team faced was that not all of the students had examined the provided digital collections ahead of time. The instruction team opted to assign the pre-class exercise for two reasons: to allow more time for discussion and practice searches during the class session; and to provide easier access for students attending the Zoom class on a mobile device, where it would be

difficult to browse online materials while participating in the video meeting. In future iterations of the class, it would be better to incorporate browsing time into the class session, or work with the professor to make the pre-class assignment mandatory (perhaps through students' participation grades).

## Results

Following the class session, the instruction team discussed the outcomes via email. They provided each other qualitative feedback about their parts of the session, a major benefit of the team-teaching model. The instruction team also used the LibGuide's statistics module to evaluate the rate of class participation in both the pre- and in-class assignments. Running a report for the class LibGuide provided data about the number of clicks each link to a digital collection or database received; these numbers confirmed the instructors' suspicions: not all of the students had surveyed the materials before class, and the class session was too short for students to explore more than one or two of the resources on the LibGuide.

While both members of the instruction team extended invitations for students to schedule follow-up appointments, only one student did so. This could be interpreted as evidence of the session's success, that all students were sufficiently prepared to conduct independent searches for primary sources. It's more likely, however, that Zoom-fatigued students were reluctant to participate in additional virtual meetings.

This instruction session was designed to help students write research papers while attending school virtually; they would need to identify appropriate primary sources on the internet in support of their arguments. After the conclusion of the semester, the instruction team reached out to the professor to solicit feedback about students' performance in this area. She wrote, "I was pleased to see that all of my students had found and made use of many high-quality primary sources in their papers, and that they did so almost entirely through the resources that the librarians introduced." She also observed that it was clear students relied on search strategies from the instruction session, resulting in "very few random internet searches."

## Lessons Learned

In this instruction session, students were introduced to the role the curatorial process plays in the creation of digital collections. They learned that archive or library policies concerning copyrighted materials will often limit what can be included in a digital collection (learning objective 2.E.). They also learned that digital collections rarely reflect the entirety of a physical collection, as limitations of staff time, digital storage space, equipment, and the personal biases of the curator impact the decisions made when selecting materials for digitization (learning objective 2.D.). They were then given the tools to apply this knowledge when searching for digital primary sources to use in their own research (learning objective 2.B.).

While this session was designed for the virtual classroom, the instruction team hopes to reproduce much of the lesson plan when the course returns to an in-person setting. In future iterations, students will be given time to browse the library's digital collections during the class session, minimizing the problems that arose from a lack of participation. Students will also learn about the digital curation process before examining the digital collections. Such priming will give students greater awareness of what silences to look for, enabling them, paradoxically, to see what can't be seen.

Such work will require more time. Accordingly, the teaching team plans to advocate for a second day of instruction. This could be offered as a research lab, and would absorb the instruction on search strategies while giving students in-class time to surface questions authentic to their research needs. If additional time cannot be made for such a workshop, instruction on source discovery and evaluation could be offered as a self-paced tutorial to be completed as homework, or in mandatory one-to-one research consultations. Whatever the ultimate arrangement, it is critical that focus not be stolen from the “absences embodied in sources.” The implications—for the philosophy of history, for the finding of relevant sources, for the project of inclusivity and representation—are too important to do otherwise.

The greatest success of this class session was the collaboration. Either librarian could have taught the class on his or her own, but co-teaching allowed them to leverage their individual strengths for a more successful instruction session. Each instructor benefited from the other’s expertise: by filling in one another’s blind spots, by presenting complementary but subtly different points of view, and by emphasizing different aspects of the process by which historical knowledge is made. In turn, students received a more coherent, comprehensive, and even enjoyable session than would have been the case had they met with only one librarian. Team-teaching has not historically been the norm at their institution, but the success of this class proved its value, and will provide a template for fruitful collaborations into the future.

## Appendix 1: Worksheet

### HIST 3469: U.S. Foreign Relations — Finding Primary Sources

The *Foreign Relations of the United States* presents the official documentary record of major U.S. foreign policy decisions across more than 450 volumes. Explore the volume of greatest relevance to your topic, then: (1) describe two methods for locating specific papers within that volume and (2) paste the link to a record you might later use.

Journalism is sometimes described as the “first rough draft of history.” Use one of the databases on the Newspapers tab of your LibGuide to find reporting on some aspect of your topic. Skim your article; does anything stand out about its tone, interpretation, or accuracy?

Locate a book on your topic using the library catalog. Describe two ways that you can locate other relevant sources using only the book you found or its catalog record.

Choose one: Use Google to locate a primary source from a database not featured on your LibGuide. Try pairing topic keywords with terms such as library, archives, or primary sources. What does this source contribute to your understanding of the topic? OR, use the Digital National Security Archive to locate a document that helps you narrow your topic to a research question.