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## Reading in the (Local) Archives: Integrating KAS Interdisciplinary Literacy Practices in the K–12 Classroom

*Heather Fox*

When I attended college, it seemed that special collections and archives held artifacts to be revered from a distance. I remember that one of my classes even convened in a room full of archived books, shelved behind locked, wrought iron doors. No one mentioned them. They remained buried in a coating of dust. However, students' access to special collections and archives evolved since my college memories. No longer a "show and tell" exhibit, collections and archivists welcome students, inviting them to visit frequently through face-to-face and virtual opportunities (Bartlett and Nofziger 3).

Archivist Ken Osborne's assertion that archives can address K–12 instructional needs in the mid-1980s has developed into an "archival turn" that promotes inquiry-based, authentic learning through archival pedagogy (27–8). This "turn" initially gained momentum with history/social studies courses seeking authentic assessments for standardized tests, but English classes progressively incorporated the archives to teach discipline-specific methodologies (Hendry 129). Scholars now argue for the development of a "wider community of practice across institutions, which would encompass archivists, librarians, curators, faculty, K–12 educators, and museum educators"—an initiative driven by the assertion that "pedagogies incorporating archival research and archival materials" constitute "an inquiry-based model of education," which implement opportunities for improved "close reading skills and understanding of historical contexts," "meaningful and original research," and "greater collaboration" (Bartlett and Nofziger 4; Hayden 135–7). Archive-based learning is uniquely positioned to facilitate critical reading and interdisciplinary research methodologies, especially when these engagements consider "the construction of the archives themselves—both what is documented as well as what is not" (Yakel

280, 285). While collected artifacts appear "to point toward the past," their introduction in interdisciplinary literacy practices has the capacity to "call into question the coming of the future" (Derrida and Prenowitz 26, emphasis added).

This "calling into question" constitutes an interdisciplinary literary practice (ILP) that provides "intentional opportunities for students to practice the behaviors of literate citizens" ("KAS: Reading and Writing" 10). Digital archives, in particular, are accessible in most K–12 classrooms and address all ten ILPs toward "fostering an environment that goes beyond teaching and learning isolated skills" and "empower[ing] independent, lifelong learners who think deeply and critically about text" ("KAS: Reading and Writing" 10). In the same way that a special collection piqued my curiosity in college, students often describe their excitement about encounters that facilitate their thinking through "the detective work involved in teasing out meanings from unedited and unglossed documents" (Gotkin). Furthermore, when students discover connections between an artifact and personal experience—recognizable setting, person, or community event—reading in the archives makes interdisciplinary learning relevant and transformative. Incorporating materials from local archives in the K–12 classroom connects students to materials "that speak to the history of [a] region . . . and invite all of us to consider ways of reading that dissolve disciplinary boundaries and inform our thinking about relationships between time, place, and perspective" ("Special Collections & Archives" 8).

In an advanced composition course for pre-service teachers (PSTs), I implement this philosophy through my design of a project that relies on student-driven inquiry, critical reading and thinking, interdisciplinary research, and collaboration. After attending a class session in

the special collections and archives library, groups of two to three students select an artifact from a digital, archivist-designed exhibit. Groups read the artifact, research contexts related to the artifact, develop a lesson plan for ELA instruction, and write an English education-structured article that narrates their reading, research, and (proposed) teaching. In the process, they grapple with what constitutes a “text” and how historical, social, and/or political contexts might influence interpretations. These investigations require collaboration and inform approaches to planning instruction. Archive-based learning—reading artifacts, researching primary and secondary sources related to the artifact, and writing about findings—re-envision how we define and read texts. Reading in the (local) archives provides accessible materials for K–12 classrooms that cultivate interdisciplinary literacy and student engagement.

### **Reading in the Archives Develops Transferrable Literacy Strategies across Disciplines to “Think Deeply and Critically about Text” (Interdisciplinary Literacy Practices 1, 2, 5, 8-9)**

Archival readings illumine *how* we read. When introducing the project, I share YA author Elizabeth Winthrop’s account of how she determined to write *Counting on Grace* (2007) after viewing photographs at a child labor exhibit that included Lewis Hine’s work. Then, using clear page protectors with Sharpie-penned lines drawn to create four quadrants, I slip copies of additional photographs from Hine’s collection to model an initial reading of a visual artifact. PSTs work in their groups to “close read” a photograph, describing what they notice in each quadrant separately. Rather than situate “close reading” as a “symptomatic reading” for interpreting meanings “hidden, repressed, deep, and in need of detection and disclosure,” this initial reading constitutes “a practice of critical description” that “insists on being looked *at* rather than . . . see[n] *through*” (Best and Marcus 1, 9–11). The interpretative distance between text and reader decreases so that the first focus is *what the*

*text communicates* more than *what our previous reading experiences tell us about the text* (Best and Marcus 10).

The four-quadrant reading initiates multiple, layered readings, or a process that examines both text and contexts. Readers, as Christina Haas and Linda Flower’s seminal work rightly argues, “construct meaning by building multifaceted, interwoven representations of knowledge” in which “critical reading” . . . [requires] the reader to build an equally sophisticated, complex representation of meaning (168). Visual artifacts like photographs provide an opportunity to think about these “complex representations” by reading differently to consider “how images look and how images are looked at” (Haas and Flower 168; Rose 10–11). Drawing upon cultural geographer Gillian Rose’s *Visual Methodologies* (2007), alongside teaching resources available in the Library of Congress, I developed a heuristic, or way of reading artifacts. This heuristic prompts students to begin with a surface reading and then to mediate this reading through contexts—time and place; technology; historical, social, or political influences on production; and intended audience—with the potential of contributing to the significance of a text (see appendix). This heuristic helps students to develop their own strategies for reading a variety of texts and contexts, and its questions can be easily adjusted for K–12 instruction.

After practicing with Lewis Hine’s photographs, PSTs often select “One-Room School” (Figure 1), a 1964 image described as “similar to those in scores of remote mountain communities of the Appalachian region,” for their project. Using the four-quadrant method, they notice how the photographer situates the school near the center and how the top-right and bottom-left quadrants portray a cleared mountain landscape. Then, they observe how the bottom-right quadrant focuses on the children playing a game similar to “ring-around-the-rosie,” while the bottom-left quadrant captures a few children running toward the game from an unseen location at the back of the school. As groups progress through the heuristic’s questions, they

reflect on the photograph's portrayal of economic disparity, particularly when juxtaposed with images from other mid-twentieth-century schools. They wonder about its intended audience and they initiate conversations about how educators might address the socioeconomic disparities faced by some of their students in all schools and the particular challenges associated with rural education. Finally, pre-service teachers, who grew up near Richmond, Kentucky, associate the photograph with field trips to the Granny Richardson Springs One-Room School, while those from different regions share their recollections about parents' or grandparents' memories of one-room schools.

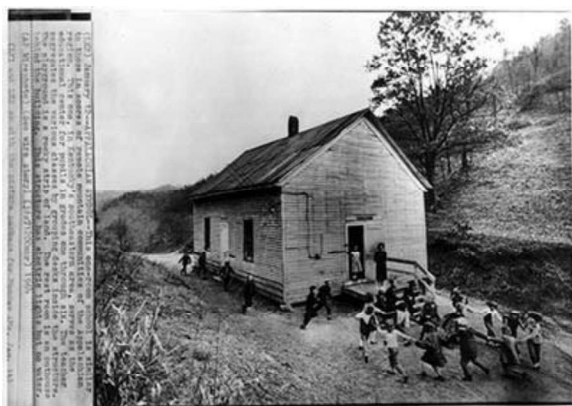


Figure 1. This black-and-white photograph, “One-Room School,” was taken in January 1964. The caption reads, “This one-room school is similar to those in scores of remote mountain communities of the Appalachian region. This one, in Kentucky’s southeastern area, serves as the educational center for pupils in grades one through six. The teacher segregates the various classes by grouping desks inside the structure. The playground is a rocky strip of land. The restroom is an outhouse behind the building. This structure has electric lights but no water.”

*Photo courtesy Eastern Kentucky University Special Collections & Archives, Richmond, Ky.*

“One-Room School” becomes the site of an active learning experience that relies on interdisciplinary research methodologies to evaluate its rhetorical situation. PSTs learn “to analyze the primary documents based on knowledge of their context, to speculate about causes and consequences, to make personal

connections, and to use evidence to support their speculations,” and they “think like historians” to locate primary and secondary sources that might enlighten why the photograph was taken or whether its portrayal was indicative of rural Kentucky education in 1964 (Hendry 120; Bartlett and Nofziger 6). Applying research from 1960s Kentucky newspapers and secondary research from education and historian scholars on rural education and one-room schools, PSTs plan ELA standards-driven lessons that are already embedded with ILPs. Some groups contemplate the use of different graphic organizers as pre-writing tools for comparing education between two centuries. Other groups outline a multi-day historical fiction writing project, such as writing diary entries from the perspective of one of the photographed children. To facilitate critical thinking experiences between disciplines further, one group integrated math standards in a pre-writing exercise by taping off the classroom to simulate a one-room school. Using one archival photograph, PSTs plan instruction that engages interdisciplinary reading and writing practices to create memorable learning experiences that think deeply, critically, and creatively about texts.

### **Reading in the Archives Cultivates “Transactional” and “Transformational” Learning Experiences through Accessibility and Collaboration (Interdisciplinary Literacy Practices 3, 4, 6–7, and 10)**

Teaching reading (and writing) through the archives involves “a more nuanced approach” that relies on collaboration (Hayden 135). Initially, these collaborations may require additional planning time but develop transactional and transformational learning experiences that model how we best learn and teach. For instance, even though digital archives are searchable by collection and item and “designed as more collaborative and inclusive spaces than their brick-and-mortar counterparts,” my conversations with special collections librarians helped to identify artifacts best suited to the project (Hayden 137). These conversations led to

a librarian-developed exhibit to select and organize artifacts for the course: <https://digitalcollections.eku.edu/exhibits/show/item-samples/items>. Similarly, to help PSTs locate additional primary and secondary sources, I worked with an education librarian to develop a course guide with research links: <https://libguides.eku.edu/ENG303/historicalsources>.

Throughout the project, I regularly share my collaborative in-progress projects to demonstrate my approach to writing and communicating with colleagues through Google documents so that PSTs might develop their own strategies. In addition to cultivating teamwork within our classroom community, these models appear in pre-service teachers' lesson plans, which propose field trips to related historical sites and partnerships with school librarians for learning resources.

Focusing on collaboration and accessibility through archival instruction creates an environment that encourages conversations about how to teach students in ways that connect classroom and community. In Figure 3, for instance, Jim Pellegrinon, EKU's Student Government Association president, leads a protest in response to the Kent State massacre. Most PSTs recognize that the photograph ("Jim Pellegrinon Leading a Protest on Main Street") was taken on Main Street in Richmond, Ky., but few are familiar with Kent State or why EKU students would have protested in response on May 7, 1970. Flanked by the same buildings that line the contemporary Main Street, Pellegrinon's outreached arms seem to span the width of the crowd, full of demonstrators waving symbols including peace signs and an American flag. The apparent disconnect between the familiar place and a historic protest motivates students to research the massacre and to apply their findings to critical considerations of contemporary protest movements. "Jim Pellegrinon Leading a Protest on Main Street" locates visual rhetoric to narrate a national tragedy in a familiar regional space.



Figure 2. This black-and-white photograph, "Jim Pellegrinon Leading a Protest on Main Street," was taken on 7 May 1970. Jim Pellegrinon, then Student Government Association president of Eastern Kentucky University, led the protest in response to the Kent State massacre.

*Photo courtesy Eastern Kentucky University Special Collections & Archives, Richmond, Ky.*

After selecting this photograph from the exhibit, most PST groups plan for their future students to write persuasive essays or to create digital texts that organize research to inform an audience. Some plan community-based learning experiences. In all of their lesson plans, considerations of how to convey the significance of this historical moment are informed by their contextual readings. For example, English Teaching major Alexandra Hamblin explains how she expanded her initial reading through additional primary research during a 2019 South Atlantic Modern Language Association (SAML) Conference presentation. In "A Regional Response to a National Crisis: Using Image to Resist Social Injustice," Hamblin shares how she discovered titles like "Not for Sale: Press Freedom," and a cartoon about fascism in an archived copy of the 21 May 1970 *Eastern Progress* issue. Additionally, she finds an editorial by Carl Rowan that compares reactions to the Kent State tragedy to the lack of response to the Orangeburg massacre a few years earlier, when African-American students from South Carolina State University were murdered for protesting Jim Crow laws at a local bowling alley.

“By examining the social injustices that have challenged our conception of the American experience through relationships between regional and national lenses,” Hamblin argues, “students learn to analyze the perspectives embedded in these narratives.” Then, she frames archival instruction as community engagement by asserting that

particularly for the classroom, community-engaged pedagogy, or incorporating events that impact a specific geographical segment as context and activism, provides opportunities for scaffolding learning and comprehension that may be applied to evolving understandings of issues that impact other regional and global communities.

Archive-based learning transforms a single story through readings that connects students to their communities and communities to one another.

### Conclusion

When we engage archives through our teaching and research, “cultural resources [are] continually reshaped through use,” so that “whatever else the archive may be—say, an historical space, a political space, or a sacred space; a site of preservation, interpretation, or commemoration—it always already is the provisionally settled scene of our collective invention” (Robbins 19; Biesecker 124). Layered readings conducted in local archives invest in past knowledge to better understand the present and future. For the K-12 classroom, engagements with photographs, manuscripts, oral histories, scrapbooks, and ephemeral materials offer teaching and learning opportunities that directly align with all ten interdisciplinary literacy practices associated with the 2019 Kentucky Academic Standards for Reading and Writing. These readings also encourage partnerships with other educators and archivists to connect students and texts—a relationship that eliminates the dust and situates artifacts as tools for learning.

### Appendix: Close Reading Archived Photographs for Descriptive Writing Handout

*To help with the process of reading your artifact, consider and respond to all parts of the following questions:*

1. What do you notice first? What people and objects are shown? How are they arranged? What words, if any, do you see? What is happening in the image?
2. Where do you think that this photograph was taken? What is the physical setting?
3. What kinds of technology produced this visual artifact? To what extent does this affect the “truthfulness” of the image?
4. Why do you think this image was made? When do you think it was made? What contexts (social, historical, and/or political) contributed to the production of this photograph?
5. Read your photograph artifact using the four-quadrant grid method that we discussed in class. What is pictured in each quadrant? How do these elements work separately? Collectively? Which subjects are photographed more prominently than others? How are elements of the photograph arranged, and what does this arrangement tell us?
6. The “site of audiencing,” or where images meanings are made, refers to “the process by which a visual image has its meanings renegotiated, or even rejected, by particular audiences watching in specific circumstances” (Rose 22). What can we surmise about the (intended) audience for this photograph? If someone made this today, what would be different and/or similar?
7. After reading this photograph closely, what do you still wonder about?

*Developed from Gillian Rose, Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to the Interpretation of Visual Materials (Sage, 2007) and “Teacher’s Guide to Analyzing Photographs and Prints” (Library of Congress).*

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