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Review of Teaching with Primary Sources

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Review of *Teaching with Primary Sources*

By Christopher J. Prom and Janicke Hinchliffe, ed. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2016. 216 pp. Softcover. \$29.95. ISBN 978-1-931666-92-x

One of the latest entries in the Society of American Archivists Series *Trends in Archives Practice* is *Teaching with Primary Sources*. Edited by Christopher J. Prom and Lisa Janicke Hinchliffe, this concise volume contains three modules (“Contextualizing Archival Literacy,” “Teaching with Archives: A Guide for Archivists, Librarians, and Educators,” and “Connecting Students and Primary Sources: Cases and Examples”). These modules introduce archivists to the issues surrounding primary source literacy, provide practical guidance on how to create a program for teaching with primary sources, and offer sample assignments to help archivists get started. The modules can be read start-to-finish or they can be utilized as needed by archivists in search of practical ideas for their next instruction session.

The authors of the modules contained in *Teaching with Primary Sources* bring unique expertise to their task. Module 9 (“Contextualizing Archival Literacy”) is authored by Elizabeth Yakel and Doris Malkmus. Elizabeth Yakel is a professor in the University of Michigan’s School of Information whose research has focused on primary source and archival literacy for the last decade. Her 2004 article calling for information literacy for primary sources launched the ongoing discussion within the archival community about primary source literacy. Doris Malkus chaired two working groups for the Society of American Archivists’ Reference, Access, and Outreach Section dealing with primary sources—one led to the creation of a National History Day Toolkit (<http://nhdarchives.pbworks.com/w/page/37898361/National%20History%20Day%20and%20Archives>) and the other to an interactive website for teaching with primary sources. Yakel and Malkmus have crafted a thoughtful essay that introduces archivists to the issues surrounding archival literacy. Modules 9 (“Teaching with Archives: A Guide for Archivists, Librarians, and Educators”) and 10 (“Connecting Students and Primary Sources: Cases and Examples”) are both authored by Sammie L. Morris, Tamar Chute, and Ellen Swain. Sammie Morris is the director of the Virginia Kelly Karnes Archives and Special Collections Research Center at Purdue University. She is also a member of the SAA-ACRL/RBMS Joint Task Force on Primary Source Literacy. Tamar Chute is university archivist and head of Archives at the Ohio State University. Ellen Swain is the archivist for Student Life and Culture at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Each of these authors has multiple years’ experience teaching with primary source materials that inform these two modules.

As each module is intended to be able to stand-alone, it is helpful to examine each module individually and then to look at the volume as a whole.

Module 9 “Contextualizing Archival Literacy” provides important background for archivists interested in teaching with primary sources. Yakel and Malkmus introduce the topic by reviewing the history of teaching with primary sources and underscore the connection between archival interest in teaching with primary sources and educational curriculum. They then move to one of the most useful sections of the module and discuss who the stakeholders interested in teaching with primary sources are. They use this section to argue that archivists must engage with stakeholders beginning with the initial planning of instruction programs all the way through their delivery. They look at both the K-12 landscape and the post-secondary landscape. They highlight the fact that there are multiple stakeholders when it comes to primary source literacy. These stakeholders include public policy makers, funding agencies (both for-profit and non-profit), governmental institutions, teachers, archivists, and others. Understanding the complexity of the landscape and how it varies from K-12 to post-secondary institutions is a critical first step for archivists interested in developing a successful program utilizing primary sources. Any program needs to be designed to meet the needs of multiple stakeholders and this begins by understanding the curricular needs that primary sources can meet. Yakel and Malkmus then shift their attention to the skills that archivists need to successfully teach with primary sources. They make it very clear that an archivist can’t just expect to walk into the classroom and be successful. Archivists need to develop good pedagogical skills and invest time in learning how to lesson plan. This is an important point. Archivists need to find ways to develop their teaching skills. Another useful section of this module reviews the standards related to teaching with primary sources. The only complaint I have about this module relates to the section on assessment. This section stresses the importance of assessment but doesn’t provide much guidance on how to go about doing assessment. This module does an excellent job of describing the current state of teaching with primary sources and how we got here as well as providing thoughtful advice about how to design and implement successful instruction programs.

Module 10 “Teaching with Archives: A Guide for Archivists, Librarians, and Educators” is a practical how-to guide for developing and managing an archival instruction program. Echoing Yakel and Malkus, it reviews the importance of planning and preparing for instruction sessions and underscores that this includes more than just the lesson material—you also need to think of teaching spaces and skill development for the archivist. It then moves to talking about developing teaching partnerships and provides really helpful communication strategies for building relationships with teachers and faculty. The authors use the module to remind archivists that there are varying levels of engagement ranging from the archivist as consultant to the archivist as instructor and that archivists need to consciously decide how much time they want to spend on instruction. The most useful section in this module is about teaching and instructional design. The authors review the creation of learning objectives, selecting collections for instruction sessions, deciding whether or not to use digital collections, designing assignments and exercises, and selecting the appropriate teaching strategy. Their advice will be applicable to instruction novices as well as veteran teachers.

Module 11 “Connecting Students and Primary Sources: Cases and Examples” advertises itself as providing readers with an analytical guide and example assignments for teaching with primary sources. It does a good job walking archival instructors through the teaching process. The section on selecting materials is particularly helpful. The discussion on how much context students need in order to successfully utilize primary sources is extremely thought provoking as is the guidance on how to provide that context for students. The most useful aspect of this module is the fact that it draws on information gathered through interviews with practitioners. Their insights are extremely helpful and make the content much more accessible. The sample assignments provided in the appendices are useful but could have been more useful with a broader discussion of how they were used in a classroom setting. It is unfortunate that the additional readings section does not point readers to either *Using Primary Sources: Hands-On Exercises* or *Past or Portal? Enhancing Undergraduate Learning Through Special Collections and Archives*. The authors are clearly aware of these resources as they mention them in the additional readings section of Module 10. These resources provide excellent examples of classroom assignments that would be very complementary to this module. Given the intended stand-alone nature of this module, it would have made sense to have included these references in this module as well as Module 10. This module will be particularly useful for archivists beginning their instructional careers.

While each of these modules is very well written and provide thoughtful advice, their real value is realized when they are bundled together. Each module complements the others and when read together they provide a holistic picture of the opportunities and challenges confronting archivists interested in teaching with primary sources. From working with stakeholders to designing assignments to delivering instruction these modules contain a wealth of useful advice. I highly recommend that this volume join the others on the shelves of archivists teaching with primary sources.

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