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Using Visual Resources to Teach Primary Source Literacy

Daniel Davis

ABSTRACT

Historic photographs provide an excellent teaching tool for promoting primary source literacy. People like to look at photographs, we all take them, and they illustrate the strengths and limitations of analyzing and interpreting primary sources. In 2019 I spent six months on sabbatical taking a “deep dive” into the new primary source literacy standards as well as the literature for teaching with primary sources. I then created a lesson plan, “Exploring the West in the Golden Age of Photography,” that focused on teaching primary source literacy through historic images. While this lesson plan was aimed at instructors teaching U.S. West History or 19th Century Photographic History, the concepts could be useful as a template for anyone teaching with visual resources. In this article I detail how primary source literacy can be taught with visual resources, specifically 19th Century Western photographs, and how, in the fall of 2019 and Spring of 2020, I used the lesson plan (when modified as needed) in five different classes. The assessment tools I used were both subjective and objective, but in either way they provided positive feedback for students who gained comprehension and confidence in finding and analyzing primary sources.

Introduction

I have taught with primary sources in one way or another for over twenty years. I have taught to bored freshman, inquisitive 3rd graders, enthusiastic graduate students and even (sometimes) grumpy seniors. I have taught semester-length classes on archival management, mentored individual graduate archival fellows, and taught single-class sessions to a wide variety of learners from those with special needs to graduate students and the public. One of the things I saw from nearly all these interactions was the natural draw people have to interesting historic images. Historical images provide a visceral connection to history and seem to convey deep truths not so readily apparent within written documents. As well, we all take photographs and have “archival” photo collections in our phones, on our computers, or in old shoe boxes. Drawing upon this natural interest, I have used historical images as a way to urge people to think more critically and question more deeply the context, symbolism, and photographer’s intention of these images. In 2019, I spent six months on sabbatical taking a “deep dive” into the 2018 Association of College & Research Libraries’ (ACRL) *Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy* as well as the literature for

teaching with primary sources.¹ After reading the standards, I realized that much of the instruction I had done for the last 20 years dovetailed nicely with these standards and that I should be able to effectively use historic images to teach primary source literacy.

In this case study, I detail how Primary Source Literacy can be taught with visual resources, specifically 19th century Western photographs, and how, in the fall of 2019 and spring of 2020, I used (and modified as needed) a lesson plan I created during my 2019 sabbatical in five different classes. The assessment tools I used were both subjective and objective, but either way, they provided positive feedback for students who gained comprehension and confidence in finding and analyzing primary sources.

Archival Instruction Background

Similar to most archivists, I had no training nor any experience with instruction when I started my first archival position. My evolution from teaching novice to something resembling competency took years and only after many diversions and dead ends. I began my career as an archival instructor at the University of Wyoming teaching a session of a History of Wyoming class in the spring of 1997. I was tired that day after spending a mostly sleepless night convinced I was going to “mess up” my presentation. I needn’t have worried. This class was at 8:00 a.m. and was mostly to non-history majors who needed it as a credit and who were, to put it mildly, uninterested in me or my talk. For the next three years, however, at the University of Wyoming’s American Heritage Center, I had a number of opportunities to teach classes or give lectures to a variety of groups, and to a wide range of students.

The instruction program for the Special Collections & Archives (SCA) Division at Utah State University was not as robust in 2000 when I became their photograph curator. For the first few years my contribution was mostly to talk about how photograph collections could provide illustrations for “real scholarship” (meaning with documents) to small groups of either English or History students. I did eventually move on to teaching one-hour show and tell classes, highlighting the most interesting items in SCA. Two things, however, changed my perspective and opened my eyes to encouraging students to create their own interpretations of primary sources through active learning. One was my colleague Folklore Curator Randy Williams. Mrs. Williams had embedded herself and the archival collections into the folklore classes at USU. Folklore students contributed their own work to the collections and I saw how Williams constantly pushed the students to think critically about the context and interpretation of everyday stories, the “story within a story”, so to speak. The second event was precipitated by the growing interest by college instructors to have their students utilize the primary sources in SCA. Special

1. SAA-ACRL/RBMS Joint Task Force on the Development of Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy (JTF-PSL), *Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy*, published July 2018, accessed February 2021, <https://www2.archivists.org/sites/all/files/GuidelinesForPrimarySourceLiteracy-June2018.pdf>.

Collections needed a coordinator of instruction and I accepted this position (in addition to my duties as the photograph curator) in 2014.

As the instruction coordinator, I along with SCA staff began creating partnerships with USU instructors to incorporate primary source analysis into their courses. In 2015, we were approached by Dr. Susan Cogan to go a step further and have her history students meet in Special Collections in order to create digital exhibits based on late Medieval texts located in our department. This class led to more instructors using SCA material as the basis for either physical or digital exhibits. While I felt these classes were successful and both instructors and students were satisfied, I noticed that students struggled to critically analyze images in the same way as textual documents.

This idea was in my head as I was writing my book, *Across the Continent: The Union Pacific Photographs of A.J. Russell*.² In this book, I wanted to bridge the worlds of academic and public history. For instance, I was not stating bold new academic treatises. Rather, I wanted to provide a historical background to Russell's work and explain some of the work by art professors Martha Sandweiss and Glenn Willumson in a form that USU undergraduate students could understand. While there are more scholarly works on Western photographs, I believe *Across the Continent* is the most accessible summary description of 19th Century Western photographs for students and the public. More specifically, for my archival instruction with historic images, I created an example for showing readers how to analyze and interpret historic images.

Writing the book gave me an idea for a sabbatical. I wanted to combine my two main interests—teaching with primary sources and 19th century Western photography—into one lesson plan and so I created “Exploring the West in the Golden Age of Photography” to focus on teaching Primary Source Literacy through historic images.³ In this lesson plan, I urge students and the instructor to read the introduction and chapter eight of *Across the Continent* to provide background. While this lesson plan was aimed at instructors teaching USU classes U.S. West History or 19th Century Photographic History, the concepts could be useful as a template for anyone teaching with visual resources.

What is Primary Source Literacy?

In the 1990s and early 2000s, two things happened that led to the creation of the Primary Source Literacy standards. One, instructors, especially in literature, art, and history, increasingly sought out archivists to help teach through the experience of analyzing primary sources. These instructors needed help with picking out primary

2. Daniel Davis, *Across the Continent: The Union Pacific Photographs of A.J. Russell* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2018).
3. Daniel Davis, “Exploring the West in the Golden Age of Photography,” published August 2019, accessed February 2021, https://works.bepress.com/daniel_davis/6/.

sources that are interesting enough to peak learners' interest but that also clearly illustrate select teaching topics. Archivists know their collections and are knowledgeable partners in this process. Archivists also typically excel at placing the primary sources within the context of the format as well as the time and place that it was created. The second key was that as archivists did more instruction, they saw the benefits of teaching with primary sources not just to illustrate broader academic themes and ideas, but as a worthy exercise in encouraging critical thinking skills if students created their own unique interpretations. The term "archival literacy" was used informally but some of the early commentators suggested it to be a very broad-ranging topic moving beyond instruction into the idea of students needing to understand basic archival practices (e.g., acquisitions, arrangement and description).⁴

A task force consisting of members from the Society of American Archivists, Association of College & Research Libraries, and the Rare Books & Manuscripts Section of the American Library Association began meeting in 2015. After numerous open forums, comment periods, and several drafts, the final version was submitted to SAA, ACRL, and RBMS in January 2018 and formally approved by the three organizations soon thereafter. *Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy* notes that it "intersects with the other literacies, including information literacy, visual literacy, and digital literacy, and concepts like collective memory, cultural heritage, and individual/cultural perspectives" but that it was developed in the spirit of ACRL's *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*.⁵ Information Literacy is, in fact, the philosophical underpinnings for ACRL's Primary Source Literacy and similar to Information Literacy, Primary Source Literacy is meant to be flexible and not prescriptive. Information Literacy, though, discusses larger issues such as information as a product and how that product is produced and shared in society and who gets to decide the validity of information, encompassing many types of research, including primary source research. Primary Source Literacy, however, notes that primary source research requires different skills than secondary research (although they work well together). That said, Information Literacy's frame "Searching as Strategic Exploration" is most relevant. Searching for archival primary sources is incredibly important in that the learner is often tracking down a unique item. As well, if a learner cannot find sources, they should ask themselves why the absence of these sources is also important. It is not too much of a stretch to say that what learners find will determine what history they write.

I would encourage all archivists involved in any aspect of instruction to read the Primary Source Literacy standards. The official definition is: "Primary source literacy is the combination of knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary to effectively find,

4. J. Gordon Daines and Cory L. Nimer, "In Search of Primary Source Literacy: Opportunities and Challenges," *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Cultural Heritage* 16, no. 1 (2015), <https://rbm.acrl.org/index.php/rbm/article/view/433>.
5. Association of College & Research Libraries, *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*, published January 2016, accessed February 2021, <http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework>.

interpret, evaluate, and ethically use primary sources within specific disciplinary contexts, in order to create new knowledge or to revise existing understandings.”⁶ To fellow archivists and students, I summarize Primary Source Literacy as the acknowledgment that primary source research requires skills in: searching for unique archival primary sources, recognizing many different material formats, placing primary sources in a historical context, and creating a unique interpretation of the source. The standard also acknowledges the importance of instruction to guide the learner and to recognize why some people are documented in an archive and why underrepresented groups are so often not. The standards assume that the ultimate goal for using primary sources is the creation of new intellectual products.

The concept of “archival silences” is an important component to Primary Source Literacy, and as America grapples with the lingering legacy of racism, is especially relevant. Archivists should constantly ask themselves whose story gets told and why are some groups so well represented in the archives and some not? I believe this underappreciated aspect of archival instruction deserves to be highlighted and, I have to admit, I need to do more as well. That said, photographs and especially 19th century Western photographs are useful tools in understanding archival silences because photographers pick and choose what to photograph, and learners have to think about why some people and activities were deemed important enough to photograph, while others were not.

My original intention in my sabbatical was to combine Primary Source Literacy with visual literacy in creating my lesson plan. The term “visual literacy” has been used by artists and academics since the 1970s, but it wasn’t until 2011 that it was officially codified. Visual literacy, however, has a very different tone than Primary Source Literacy. It is meant to be measurable and testable. As such, visual literacy is a prescriptive set of tools that include the creation of sophisticated visual resources. Defining Primary Source Literacy, by contrast, is “inherently problematic” and is “flexible rather than prescriptive.”⁷ Both literacies, however, emphasize finding, critically examining, and creating an interpretation from a visual document. Standards of most relevance in ACRL’s *Visual Literacy Standards for Higher Education* include: “The visually literate student finds and accesses needed images and visual media effectively and efficiently” (Standard Two), “interprets and analyzes the meanings of images and visual media” (Standard Three), and “evaluates images and their sources” (Standard Four).⁸ Because ACRL’s visual literacy standards are aimed at those who are creating and using visual documents professionally, I focused on Primary Source Literacy instead.

6. *Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy*.

7. *Ibid.*

8. *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*.

Why Photographs and Why 19th Century Western Photographs?

As my years of archival instruction had shown me, 19th century Western photographs were appealing sources in terms of teaching Primary Source Literacy. Martha Sandweiss wrote regarding Western American photographs, “American photography would realize its most compelling and distinctive subject, and through photography the West would at last become a familiar place to millions of Americans.”⁹ The 19th and early 20th century West has, in fact, had a vibrant visual component whether in format from prints to artwork to photographs, or in subject from Wild West shows and rodeos to movies and films. The assumption has been that to see the West is to learn its history. In the 1860s and 1870s, the dominant visual medium of the West was photography. During this time, the American West was at an interesting intersection between a new West of railroads, irrigation, and law-and-order, and the romantic old “Wild West” of outlaws, wagon trains, Mormon “avenging angels”, and free-roaming Native Americans. By analyzing 19th century Western photographs, students gain not only critical analysis skills, but also build a greater understanding of this transitional period (1860s-1870s) in which the economy of the West changed as it joined the national market, Anglo American settlement expanded greatly, the marginalization of Native American tribes continued, and a grieving nation looked to the West as a land of national healing after the American Civil War.

I believe that photographs provide an excellent introduction to primary sources in general and specifically for teaching Primary Source Literacy. On a practical note, these 19th century images are in the public domain; there is a large body of literature about them; and they are readily accessible online. They also illustrate the strengths and limitations of visual images as primary sources. Western photographs specifically are seductive primary sources. They seem to convey deep truths that provides us with a direct connection to Western history, and they are heavily used in documentaries, exhibits, and books. Like all photographs, however, they are a constructed vision of reality. Western railroad photographs, for instance, are a small fragment of a larger story. They don't tell us about rampant corruption on the transcontinental railroad, or about prevailing attitudes of the dominant culture towards “non-White” immigrants who worked on the railroad, and about the devastating effects the railroad would have on some Native American tribes.

What visual documents such as photographs do provide are useful learning tools because they are conducive to new interpretations based on one's unique background and experiences. Getting students to understand that photographs should be analyzed just like any other historical document and that they are not unbiased, objective pieces of reality is tricky. I like to tell students that photographs are a facsimile of reality. It is a constructed vision, an active process between the

9. Martha Sandweiss, *Print the Legend: Photography and the American West* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 154.

photographer, the subject, and the viewer. What you see in the image might be very different than what the photographer intended you to see and what you see in the image might be very different than what I see in the image.

Literature Review

Prior to the sabbatical, I had read quite a bit of the literature about 19th century Western photography. The three most influential works in the field are: *Era of Exploration: The Rise of Landscape Photography in the American West* by Weston Naef; *Print the Legend: Photography in the American West* by Martha Sandweiss; and *Iron Muse: Photographing the Transcontinental Railroad* by Glenn Willumson. *Era of Exploration* was the first book to effectively argue that Western photographers of the 1860s and 1870s were important artists and documentarians and that their work should be analyzed not only through conventional art criticism, but also by placing their work in a historical context.¹⁰ It was the most influential work in the field until 2002 when Martha Sandweiss published *Print the Legend*. Sandweiss argued that 19th century photography had limitations as a medium in conveying meaning to the public and it either needed accompanying narration or had to be converted into a new medium.¹¹ According to Sandweiss, it wasn't until the late 1860s that photography married narration with image to become the dominant media in the West. With narration the viewer is directed to understand the meaning of the image which usually pointed to a glorious economic future for the West. *Iron Muse* by Glenn Willumson built upon Sandweiss' work. Dr. Willumson's book placed the work of photographers of the first transcontinental railroad within other mediums of the time, arguing that photographers should be understood not so much as artists fulfilling their artistic visions, but as corporate employees creating corporate photographic archives.¹²

Since I already had a foundation in the history of 19th century Western photography, during my sabbatical I focused my reading into three areas: teaching with primary sources, writing and teaching history using visual images, and creating lesson plans based on archival material. The first book I read, or really anyone should read about archival instruction, is Christopher Prom and Lisa Hinchliffe's *Teaching with Primary Sources*. This book provides background on the evolution of archival instruction and archival literacy, tips and suggestions for starting and growing

10. Weston J. Naef, and James N. Wood, *Era of Exploration: The Rise of Landscape Photography in the American West, 1860-1885* (Boston: Albright-Knox Art Gallery, 1975).

11. Sandweiss, *Print the Legend*.

12. Glenn Willumson, *Iron Muse: Photographing the Transcontinental Railroad* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013). Every major Western photographer from the 1860s and 1870s (A.J. Russell, C.R. Savage, William Henry Jackson, Timothy O'Sullivan, Alfred Hart, and Jack Hillers) has at least one biography and sometimes several.

archival instruction programs, a wealth of sources for further study, and case studies and guidelines for creating lesson plans based on archival material.¹³ *Teaching with Primary Sources*, however, came out in 2016 before ACRL's official Primary Sources Literacy standards, and I am curious if the authors will create a new version of this book reflecting the new standards. The second book I would recommend is *Past or Portal: Enhancing Undergraduate Learning through Special Collections and Archives*, edited by Eleanor Mitchell, Peggy Selden, and Suzy Taraba.¹⁴ Through numerous case studies, this book provides a useful overview of the goals and methods of teaching with primary sources, along with specific classroom experiences and different philosophies of archival instruction. For example, in the essay "What is Primary: Teaching Archival Epistemology and the Sources Continuum", Michael J. Paulus creates a clever framework for evaluating the "primary-ness" of an archival sources.¹⁵

Karl Marx wrote that "the photograph seems, at first sight, a very simple thing, the image made by the action of light on a photosensitive medium. But on closer inspection it turns out to be a very queer entity indeed, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties."¹⁶ There is quite a bit of academic writing that explores these subtleties and niceties, but for most archivists, I do not believe these are useful. An archivist needs to understand that historic photographs (or really any image) can be deconstructed similar to any other cultural document or work of art. Much of the academic writing about photographs as cultural document, however, consists of academics writing to other academics and the incredibly nuanced and complicated theories are honestly difficult to comprehend if one is not immersed in this world. A better bet in my mind is exploring learning theory relating to history. The first section of *History Beyond the Text: A Student's Guide to Approaching Alternative Sources* deals with photographs and it is an excellent introduction into thinking critically about photographs and how to create historical writing by analyzing photographs. *Historical Thinking and other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* by Samuel Wineburg is a fascinating and frankly mind-expanding treatise analyzing high school history instruction. Wineburg discusses the psychology of historical thinking in American students and what history education can and should be.¹⁷ There are numerous academic published works devoted to K-12

13. Christopher J. Prom and Lisa Janicke Hinchliffe, eds., *Teaching with Primary Sources* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2016).

14. Eleanor Mitchell, Peggy Selden, and Suzy Taraba, eds., *Past or Portal: Enhancing Undergraduate Learning through Special Collections and Archives* (Chicago: Association of College & Research Libraries, 2012).

15. *Ibid.*, 75-80.

16. Sarah Barber and Corinna M. Peniston-Bird, eds., *History Beyond the Text: A Student's Guide to Approaching Alternative Sources* (London: Routledge, 2009), 52.

17. Samuel S. Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001).

history education and primary sources, but almost nothing for teaching with primary sources in secondary education.

As far as creating lesson plans with primary sources, *Using Primary Sources: Hands-On Instructional Exercises* by Anne Bahde, Heather Smedberg, and Mattie Taormina is an excellent place to begin to find sample lesson plans and for understanding what constitutes a successful lesson plan.¹⁸ These plans are tailored to specific classes and specific types of collection material, but just about any primary source teaching scenario is covered. There are also several useful websites to find sample lesson plans. The Brooklyn Historical Society sponsors the website www.TeachArchives.org which provides extensive background on their four-part philosophy of teaching with primary sources.¹⁹ The Library of Congress has voluminous materials on teaching with primary sources which are designed by education professionals. These materials—no surprise—are based around teaching historical themes through their digitized collections.²⁰ Finally, Society of American Archivists provides case studies for teaching with primary sources. Unlike [TeachArchives.org](http://www.TeachArchives.org) and the Library of Congress which stress K-12 teaching, the SAA case studies tend to focus on college-level courses. These are not lesson plans per se, but they do discuss in detail the success that archivists have had with specific classes or with specific teaching strategies.²¹

Creating the Lesson Plan

The lesson plan “Exploring the West in the Golden Age of Photography” is far more detailed and complicated than what archivists typically use, especially for a one-shot archival instruction session.²² While I wrote it specifically for U.S. West history courses or history of photography courses, and it is focused on 19th century Western photographs, I believe it could act as a template for teaching with any visual documents, and even for other archival mediums such as government records and manuscript collections. The basic template for my lesson plan came from Bahde’s

18. Anne Bahde, Heather Smedberg and Mattie Taormina, eds., *Using Primary Sources: Hands-On Instructional Exercises* (Santa Barbara: Libraries Unlimited, 2014).

19. Brooklyn Historical Society, “Our Teaching Philosophy,” accessed February 2021, <http://www.teacharchives.org/articles/our-teaching-philosophy/>. TeachArchives four-part philosophy: 1. Define specific learning objectives for the visit to the archives; 2. Thoughtfully select individual documents (the fewer the better); 3. Design tailored small-group activities, and 4. Model document analysis through directed, specific prompts

20. Library of Congress, “Classroom Materials at the Library of Congress,” accessed February 2021, https://www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/?fa=partof_type:lesson+plan.

21. Society of American Archivists, “Case Studies on Teaching with Primary Sources (CSTPS),” accessed February 2021, <https://www2.archivists.org/publications/epubs/Case-Studies-Teaching-With-Primary-Sources>.

22. The lesson plan is available at https://works.bepress.com/daniel_davis/6/.

Using Primary Sources: Hands-On Instructional Exercises. In my lesson plan, I provide prep readings, lesson plan objectives, classroom mechanics, three modeling examples, and a photograph analysis worksheet. The primary source learning objectives defined by the SAA-ACRL/RBMS's *Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy* most fitting for my lesson plan are:

1. *Conceptualize: C. Draw on primary sources to generate and refine research questions. D. Understand that research is an iterative process and that as primary sources are found and analyzed the research question(s) may change.*
3. *Read, Understand, and Summarize: B. Identify and communicate information found in primary sources, including summarizing the content of the source and identifying and reporting key components such as how it was created, by whom, when, and what it is.*
4. *Interpret, Analyze, and Evaluate: B. Critically evaluate the perspective of the creator(s) of a primary source, including tone, subjectivity, and biases, and consider how these relate to the original purpose(s) and audience(s) of the source. C. Situate a primary source in context by applying knowledge about the time and culture in which it was created; the author or creator; its format, genre, publication history; or related materials in a collection.*²³

Most students need guidance to understand the nuances of analyzing photographs critically so I typically use one or the other of these two example images below as a modeling exercise for the students. In my lesson plan I provide seven images, but these two are consistently the most fruitful in generating discussion.

23. *Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy.*



Lesson Image #1²⁴

Historical Context—This image was shot after the Golden Spike Ceremony. The Union Pacific was under fire in the press for shoddy construction. Laboring for wages at this time was looked down upon, especially for Irish laborers (Irish were not “white” enough and Catholic, and labor was not as “manly” as owning your own land or your own business). Unusual at this time to have images of laborers and to show the work they did. Supposedly an “Action shot” of man with hammer in mid-air, even though the exposure would have taken 15-30 seconds. Andrew J. (A.J.) Russell was not a government photographer; he was hired by the Union Pacific Railroad but he made images for public sale as well.

Find—Can find easily in the online collection at the Oakland Museum of California. Unless you had the title or name of the photographer, it’s hard to find in Google Images. [Image at: <http://collections.museumca.org/?q=collection-item/h694592157>]

Analyze—A stereo-view negative which were meant for public, commercial sale—not as a private commission. Was there a temporary bridge if this is the permanent one? Note the shadow of the photographer in lower right. Hard to tell ethnicity of men, but appear to be white, maybe Irish? Note snow in the

24. Andrew J. Russell, “Constructing Permanent Bridge, Green River,” 1869, collodion glass-plate negative, Oakland Museum of California, accessed February 2021, <http://collections.museumca.org/?q=collection-item/h694592157>. For background on this image and similar Russell images, see: Davis, *Across the Continent*, 81, 88, 99, 101.

background, and the frozen river—had to be taken late November to early March. No power tools. U.P.R.R. (Union Pacific Railroad) on the flatcar.

Evaluate—The image is not just a scene that Russell happened to come upon. He partially posed subjects, as the man with hammer in mid-air shows. By photographing laborers, he seems to be reminding the viewer of the difficult railroad work done by workers like these. The photographer wants us to remember (with his shadow in the frame) that while one could have found this type of this scene all along the line of the TCRR, this image is his creation. Image shows that the railroad was not a finished product at the time of this photo.

Research Question—[Students may come up with a variety of questions and there isn't just one "official" question.] Simple: Did the Union Pacific want Russell to show how they were finishing the hastily built line after May 10, 1869. More complex: Was Russell trying to elevate the status of laborers on the TCRR by reminding us who did the actual work of the TCRR?



Lesson Image #2²⁵

Historical Context—This image was taken in Canada not for commercial sale but for the Canadian government. The leader of the survey thought Hime was lazy and incompetent, but he made some of the first images of the West using the wet-plate collodion negative process. It's not clear if the skull was from a white or Native American person. There were a lot of negative descriptions in popular magazines, travelogues, and government reports of the arid portion of the North American West in the 1850s, especially because of human and animal dangers, inhospitable terrain, and a lack of water.

Find—Part of Yale's Beinecke Library's Digital Collections. This image is hard to find in Google Images or in Yale University Library's digital collections unless you know the photographer. [Image at: <https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/2011271>]

Analyze—Includes a human skull and another bone (which might be animal or human). Incredibly flat land with not much grass. No water in sight. Not a stereo-view, but a large format image.

Evaluate—The human skull reminds us of death and we naturally wonder how

25. Humphrey Lloyd Hime, "The Prairie Looking West," *Photographs Taken at Lord Selkirk's Settlement on the Red River of the North*, Yale University Library, accessed February 2021, <https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/2011271>. For background on this image see: Sandweiss, *Print the Legend*, 143-146.

the person died. Visually, this is not an inviting scene, especially to people used to mountains, hills, and trees. The skull could have been conveniently placed in an image.

Research Question—[Students may come up with a variety of questions and there isn't just one "official" question.] Simple: Was the West frightening for Anglo Americans/Canadians in the 1850s? Were Canadians more ambivalent about Western settlement than Americans? Complex: As Anglo Americans explored the prairie regions of North America, were they discouraged by what they found? Was this seen as a land hostile for Anglo settlers?

Picking the right primary sources for student analysis is critical. If the image is bland and uninteresting, students flounder or lose interest. If it seems too obscure, students struggle to understand the significance of the image. These two images are especially useful in generating discussion. Andrew J. (A.J.) Russell probably took this stereo-view (the original negative is housed at the Oakland Museum of California) in December 1869. Russell only took a few images per day, putting a lot of careful thought into each one. I do not think it was a coincidence that his shadow appears in the frame as a subtle reminder of who created the image. Although not taken in the United States, Humphrey Lloyd Hime took his terrifying image on the Western plains of Canada. This image is in stark contrast to American photographers who tended to emphasize economic possibilities.

With an in-person class of students working in pairs or small groups, I hand out a copy of the images without historical context. (Note that the lesson plan's Find, Analyze, Evaluate, and Research Question notes are for the instructor, not the students.) During this time, I tell them not to shy away from how the image makes them feel, or to articulate their "first impressions". Examining a single image is not something learners typically do and I give them a few minutes to carefully look it over. I then hand out the Historical Context notes and ask them if that changes their interpretation. I then circulate among the groups and discuss their informal, initial assessment. At the end, we then get together as a group although students are usually more open in small group discussion. That said, I am constantly surprised how students create interesting and thoughtful interpretations. The point, of course, is not to come up with the "correct" interpretation, but to critically examine the image and articulate their own unique interpretation.

The Classroom Experience

One of the painful lessons with archives instruction is that the archivist is usually not the formal instructor and you mold your message and your lesson plan based on what the instructor wants and needs. Between October 2019 and February 2020, I taught five classes, with only one to a group of USU library student employees strictly

using the lesson plan. In a concurrent enrollment class broadcast to high school students in three locations, I broadened the class topic to be visual resources important in American History such as progressive-era photographer Jacob Riis, World War I posters, and World War II photojournalism. The other three classes consisted of a small (eight students) graduate Sociology class, as well as a Urban History and a Museum Studies class, each with around twenty students.

My first opportunity to use my lesson after taking a sabbatical was not with a Western history or photo history course, not face to face, and it was not even with college students, but with high school students taking college credit. The format was not conducive to asking questions and receiving responses. The instructor had struggled with the class particularly in getting the students to pay attention. Over my 20 plus years of teaching, I have become a firm believer in creating a more relaxed, fun atmosphere in my instruction. I try not taking myself too seriously with undergraduates, let alone high school students. During my presentation, I mixed in random pop cultural references, made jokes at my expense, and even used sample photographs that I thought would have meaning to them (e.g., Utah Jazz players and Fortnite characters). Ultimately, however, it was difficult to get conversation out of the students, and I could not have group exercises. Still, the instructor was quite pleased that the students seemed more interested and engaged than for other classes she taught.

After the concurrent enrollment class, I struck upon the idea of teaching non-SCA library student employees so that I could stick closely to my original lesson plan. This was a contrived situation but the students were happy to do something different and get paid, and they certainly took it seriously. What I quickly found out was that teaching from a lesson plan and giving an overview of Special Collections are different experiences. Teaching a lesson requires much more preparatory work, and the instructor has to pay close attention to time. I taught the session in one hour and found I was rushing through the lesson. While the images generated much discussion among the students, we did not have adequate time to share all of the interpretations. In addition to the image analysis worksheets, I had the students fill out a feedback form as well.

The next class I taught from the lesson plan was a graduate sociology class taught by Dr. Marisela Martinez-Cola. I knew Dr. Martinez-Cola from outside of work (our children were in the same class in school). She is outgoing and very enthusiastic about primary source research and analyzing primary sources. She feels that sociology in general relies too much on quantitative numbers and should pay more attention to the qualitative data that can be mined from primary sources to tell a more nuanced story of the past, in particular historic racial inequality. She approached SCA about giving a presentation to sociology faculty about primary source research, but we had to pause that idea and instead she brought over her class. I prefer not to teach night classes but I am glad I did as it was one of the best instruction experiences I have ever had in the archives. I modified my lesson plan to include both photographs and documents and I broke the class up into pairs. There

were only eight students but they were incredibly enthusiastic and vocal, coming up with clever and insightful interpretations. Dr. Martinez-Cola later wrote, “The workshop allowed my graduate students to recognize that historic photographs can help to shape research questions, deepen one’s understanding of social context, and provide information critical to one’s analysis. From providing markers of socioeconomic class to capturing the dynamics of race and gender, these materials provide invaluable information that could not be captured in statistics, traditional writings, or voice recordings.”²⁶

In the spring of 2020, I taught my lesson plan in a modified version with a mix of photographs and documents to two more undergraduate history classes, Urban History and Museum Studies. I asked the students to fill out a simple Qualtrics survey along with completing document analysis worksheets. I felt the Urban History class was more of a success than Museum Studies. Urban History instructor Dr. Lawrence Culver is charismatic and enthusiastic about teaching with primary sources. The Museum Studies class taught by Dr. Molly Cannon consisted of a majority of anthropology students with the class focus on artifact acquisition, preservation, and display. My session with this class illustrated the need to tie every lesson back to the class’ goals and objectives; and if instruction is not concretely linked into these goals and objectives, then students can lose focus.

Overall, teaching my lesson plan was a mixed bag. It was too specific to use at USU, except in a contrived situation. Also, it illustrated the limitations of archival instruction where we must tailor our product based on the needs of the instructor. A (perhaps) hard lesson to learn is that archivists are not the instructors on record and we need flexibility. The basic concepts, however, of having students create their own interpretation by analyzing primary sources, whether they are photographs or documents, is valid. The feedback I received both formally and informally was positive. One student wrote in an evaluation, “I feel more confident! I like getting to discuss it w/ a partner—it helped me express my interpretations better.” Students often do not feel comfortable expressing their opinions to the entire class, but their written interpretations can be much more complex and insightful.

Conclusion

Are historic photographs good tools to teach Primary Source Literacy? The short answer is yes. Both my informal and formal feedback indicates positive results. In the spring of 2020, I created a simple Qualtrics survey that asked only five questions (since professors have told me they want to keep surveys short and simple). Two questions were asked regarding their confidence prior to the lesson and after:

On a scale of 1 to 5 (1 being “not much” and 5 being “very much”), how confident were you in finding materials in Special Collections?

26. Email communication with Dr. Marisela Martinez-Cola, March 26, 2020.

*On a scale of 1 to 5, how confident were you in analyzing and creating an interpretation of a primary source?*²⁷

Twenty-six students filled out the survey; at the class's beginning, the averages were 2.35 for question 1 and 3.00 for question 2 (confidence in analyzing and interpretation). At the class' end, the averages jumped to 3.70 and 3.90, respectively. But not all results can be shown in a survey. As I stand in front of a class, I can feel the energy in the room as they look and discuss historic images. As I circulate among the students and I ask informal questions, I can get a sense if they are struggling and need more instruction. In these informal interactions, especially while engaging photographs, I am always struck with how students make interesting comments and interpretations based on their unique background and life experiences. Time and time again, I can just tell when they "get it" and start to understand a little about the "metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties" that make historical images so interesting.²⁸

I think it is too early to declare these classes a complete success. I believe the lesson for archival instructors like myself, who do not have a background in teaching, is that promoting Primary Source Literacy is an iterative process that is always a work in progress. I will continue to use the lesson plan, tweak my instruction, and gather assessment data both formally and informally. Still, while early, I think encouraging primary source literacy through the use of historical photographs has enormous potential.

27. Survey found at https://usu.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_206cCFQAQDi6wuh.

28. Barber and Peniston-Bird, *History Beyond the Text*, 52.