

Engaging Undergraduates in Primary Source Research

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Chapter Five

Developing an Open Primary Source Reader on Gender and Sexuality

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and Megan Mulder

This chapter presents a nontraditional, collaborative approach to teaching with primary sources that takes into account student motivation and the value of student work. Leveraging preexisting relationships and individual areas of expertise, a history professor and a team of librarians at Wake Forest University (WFU) designed a course that was grounded in the principles of open pedagogy, with information literacy and primary source competencies as core components. In working together to create open access primary source scholarship, and doing so in an environment that emphasized openness, trust, and the freedom to take risks, students in this entry-level course pursued their personal research interests and engaged primary sources with the energy and care of true scholars. As a result, they developed their primary source research skills and came to understand their emerging roles as knowledge creators.

INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT AND COURSE OVERVIEW

WFU is a private research and teaching university located in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Approximately five thousand undergraduates study a range of liberal arts fields. WFU is the smallest member of the Atlantic Coast Conference, and athletics, fraternities, and sororities make up the predominant forces shaping students' social lives. At the same time, there is a substantial minority of students from a wide range of backgrounds, including international students, first-generation students, and students from the region who receive full scholarships. Faculty members generally teach two courses per semester, with twenty-five or fewer students per course, allowing a high level of direct student engagement and consistent, personalized feedback.

The course, *Gender and Sexuality in World History*, is an entry-level course that fulfills the general education requirement of the history department. It is also cross-listed in the department of Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. First offered in the fall of 2019, it has been taught once each subsequent semester. In creating this archive-centered course, the professor wanted his students to feel excited about encountering and making sense of primary sources and archival materials and making

connections between those materials and their own lives. He also wanted to challenge the popular perception of history as irrelevant to students' career pursuits, an attitude that feels particularly acute at our institution.

While the majority of students in the course are in their first year, the course tends to attract a much more diverse group than a typical WFU class. Of the twenty-five students in the seminar class, the majority are female-identified, and many identify openly as LGBTQ+. In comparison with other WFU classrooms, a disproportionately large percentage of students identify as people of color, are first-generation college students, or are from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Many are engaged in student government or campus activist organizations and tend to be less involved in Greek life than their peers. Within this diversity and the wide range of student experiences, conflict often arises from passionate engagement with the subject, differences in values and cultural expectations, and changes in knowledge and attitudes. While the class frequently works toward consensus, students work through conflict as a generative part of a collaborative process.

COURSE DESIGN AND DEVELOPMENT

The collaboration has its roots in long-standing teaching and research relationships between the professor and the librarian team, including the research librarian for history, the special collections librarian, and the digital pedagogy librarian. When the professor was awarded a summer course development grant in 2018, he brought the team together to assist with the design and implementation of the course. For eighteen months, we worked together, designing the class backward from the archive, planning each step that would be needed to get mostly first-semester college students to be able to engage with primary sources. Our goal was to create a space in which students could begin to understand how primary sources help them make sense of their lives and their world, and, through collaborating, how students could transform both.

In designing the class, we worked from the following set of beliefs and guiding principles that have evolved over time:

- Rather than acting as passive observers of history, students should be active participants in the creation of historical scholarship so that they will experience firsthand the excitement of the archive, the mechanisms of scholarship, and the inherent structural inequities that affect historical research.
- Through collaboratively creating a project intended for use by their peers, students will realize that their work has meaning and value beyond the immediate course and will therefore hold themselves and each other to higher standards and produce higher quality work.
- By giving students certain kinds of control in the classroom and granting them power to make decisions in the course, we believe they will be more engaged and more motivated to pursue their interests and take risks.

Project-Based Approach

The course's primary learning objectives emphasize the skills required for students to do authentic historical scholarship using primary sources and archives, but we also designed the course to increase students' excitement about their work. To achieve these outcomes, the professor began working with the digital pedagogy librarian to develop a central collaborative project: a student-authored primary source reader. Over the course of the semester, students worked with the professor and the librarians to research primary and secondary sources related to gender and sexuality in world history. Each student wrote a scholarly primary source analysis in the form of a book chapter, each of which included a visual or textual representation of their chosen primary source, annotated with footnotes explaining terms and concepts. Students then worked together to compile their chapters into an edited volume.¹

Students were expected to collaborate from the very beginning to establish a collective research agenda and to organize the book thematically and chronologically. They self-organized into various working groups based on tasks that they identified for themselves: developing the book's title and overall structure, writing an introduction and acknowledgments, performing basic formatting and editorial work, and creating an original piece of cover art. The resulting book was published both digitally, on the online platform Pressbooks, and in print through the library's in-house publishing imprint. It is used as a textbook and an example for the next semester's class.

To support the primary source reader project, we developed a series of smaller assignments to give students opportunities to create their own primary sources that connected historical themes to the present. For example, in the Autoethnography assignment, students applied critical gender and sexuality lenses to analyze a university social function such as a fraternity party, or a family function such as Thanksgiving dinner. In the History beyond the Classroom assignment, small groups of students attended history lectures and screenings of films and drew connections to class topics.

Pedagogical Underpinnings: Open Pedagogy and Ungrading

Designed to get students to embrace their agency as creators of a new work of scholarship, the primary source reader project also demanded a certain kind of classroom environment, shaped by the principles of open pedagogy and ungrading. The concept of open pedagogy challenges instructors to reevaluate the traditional power dynamics in a classroom.² It applies the principles of openness to the work students produce, emphasizing the value of student intellectual labor and acknowledging that students are far too often tasked with doing what David Wiley calls "disposable assignments," or "assignments that add no value to the world—after a student spends three hours creating it, a teacher spends 30 minutes grading it, and then the student throws it away."³ By embracing the affordances of openness, instructors can guide their students to create reusable, authentic works that live outside of the course and outlast it. These works usually bear licenses (such as those from Creative Commons) that permit free creative and scholarly reuse by those within the institution and beyond, including students in future classes.

In keeping with the goal of sharing power with students, we felt that it was important to reassure them that they could take risks and experience setbacks without jeopardizing their grade. “Ungrading,”⁴ as it has come to be known, is a response to a number of research-based conclusions about the effect grades have on students and their learning. Instructors employing ungrading strategies typically provide students with extensive feedback but assign few or no points or letter grades. In this course, students worked together with the professor to create a shared set of norms for classroom engagement, then began a daily self-reflection ritual in which they documented their own participation and progress in relation to these norms and the class learning objectives. These daily reflections formed part of the evidentiary base for two substantial self-assessments in which students proposed their midterm and final overall grades. At both points, the professor negotiated this grade with students through individual feedback or conferences. As we discuss later, students often cited the ungrading approach as a key component in promoting intrinsic motivation and building an environment of trust.

PRIMARY SOURCE AND INFORMATION LITERACY INSTRUCTION

One of the goals of the course was to enable students to experience the excitement of hands-on archival research. This required both building students’ historical research skills and creating spaces for students to freely explore primary sources and draw connections across time and place. The professor worked with the history librarian and the special collections librarian to plan multiple class visits from the librarians and two sessions in the physical archive. The librarians designed their sessions around a scaffolded series of research tasks, including identifying historically appropriate keywords, searching and browsing databases, and documenting source information and research progress.

Aligning her approach with the “Research as Inquiry,” “Searching as Strategic Exploration,” and “Information Has Value” frames from the *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*,⁵ the history librarian taught three class sessions and provided individual consultations with students. She also created a pathfinder for the course with links to primary and secondary sources, information about working with primary sources, and strategies on finding secondary sources for context. In the first session, the history librarian gave an overview of the course pathfinder, demonstrated how to browse selected primary source repositories, and explained how to conduct searches for sources about a specific topic. Students practiced using selected databases and discussed the variety of types of sources available, how to differentiate between primary and secondary sources, and how that distinction could vary based on the question being asked. For the remainder of the class, students explored various primary source collections on the pathfinder and began collecting potential sources for their project.

As an introduction to hands-on engagement with archival sources, the library’s Special Collections and Archives department hosted two class sessions. In planning these sessions, the special collections librarian referred to the learning objectives from

the *Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy*, with a particular focus on “conveying the excitement of research with primary sources, [and] giving students a memorable or transformative experience while using such sources.”⁶ In both class sessions the students examined sets of preselected materials. During the first visit, early in the semester, small groups rotated through five stations of published and ephemeral primary source materials, each grouped by theme (gender representation in popular magazines, women’s suffrage literature, nineteenth- and early twentieth-century health and sexuality manuals, etc.). A few weeks later, the students did a more focused analysis of collections of relevant preselected manuscript files. In each session, students focused on contextualizing the sources, identifying subjects’ intentions and biases, and observing gaps and omissions in the historical record.

In a later session with the history librarian, students worked in small groups to review each other’s chosen primary sources and identify questions and terms that could be used to start searching for secondary materials to place their source in context. Many of the sources that students encountered were challenging, both in terms of content and context. Students worked together to generate questions and interrogate sources through various interpretative lenses. Groups of students created search strategies in one of the library’s research tools before discussing as a class how their strategies differed depending on the resource. The class also discussed limitations and factors to consider when searching for information, particularly as it relates to issues of gender and sexuality, such as outdated subject headings, the use of euphemisms or derogatory terms, and insufficient coverage of particular topics and individuals. In the final session, the librarian worked with students on citing items such as photographs, manuscripts, and advertisements, and then worked with students individually to create *Chicago Manual of Style* citations for their particular source.

DIGITAL PEDAGOGY AND OPEN EDUCATION INSTRUCTION

The digital pedagogy librarian was involved in teaching both the purpose of the project and its technical aspects. In the first weeks, the digital pedagogy librarian introduced the students to the disparities that exist in access to information, how open scholarship can help address these, and how the students’ participation in creating a work of open scholarship can serve to surface the histories of traditionally marginalized communities. He also led discussions on how the creation of an open educational resource can contribute to others’ understanding of the topics, as they would be providing students in future semesters not only with material to read and discuss, but also examples to emulate, extend, and improve upon. For some students, the open nature of the project motivated them to seek opportunities to explore aspects of their own identities in historic contexts. For others, the skill-building piece allowed them to have access to a new set of conversations around historical sources and scholarship. Almost everyone seemed animated by a newfound awareness that the work they were doing was meaningful and would be used in future semesters, possibly even at other institutions.

As students completed their research and finished developing their book chapters, they worked alongside the digital pedagogy librarian in Pressbooks, a WordPress-based

open source content management system, designed specifically for producing print-friendly electronic books. The digital pedagogy librarian chose Pressbooks for its ease of use, its affordances for primary source scholarship (footnotes, images, etc.), its availability through the university's existing web hosting service, and the ease with which it can export numerous e-book formats and print-ready files. Pressbooks also allows for marking works with Creative Commons licenses to facilitate reuse and creative adaptations of the original work. To help students understand their rights and responsibilities as creators of new knowledge, students spent a class session learning about and debating the various Creative Commons licenses, ultimately selecting one that they would apply to their book. These discussions were robust. Students readily drew connections between their agency as learners, their rights as creators, and their participation in a larger information economy.

OUTCOMES AND ASSESSMENT

In both iterations of the course so far, open pedagogy not only afforded students the opportunity to practice using primary sources in the production of an open work of scholarship, it also introduced profound changes in the classroom dynamic. As we ceded control of the project, students seemed to develop a sense of mutual accountability and trust in their shared pursuit of success, and we saw a far more democratic classroom emerge. For the first time for nearly everyone, power differentials among students were surfaced, acknowledged, and grappled with openly. Juniors and seniors naturally entered into mentoring relationships with first-year students. We frequently connected the subject of study to students' current and past lived experiences, and students developed resilience in talking about race, class, gender, sexuality, and other intersectional dynamics. It was not uncommon for students to find themselves engaged in open conflict with each other and with the professor. While this conflict was sometimes uncomfortable or unfamiliar, most found it to be highly generative and empowering. Students articulated both emotional and intellectual growth; they frequently described this growth as being in response to their peers, as well as their own internal processes and the input of the librarians and the professor.

Approaches such as ungrading and self-assessment were essential in developing the trust necessary for students to take risks and come to see primary source research as exciting, personally relevant, and inherently interesting. This trust contributed to activating and supporting student agency, facilitating student collaboration, and developing in students the skills necessary to make authentic contributions to public scholarship. We observed that by eliminating grades as a motivator, students were free to articulate their own goals and values. Ultimately, they held themselves and each other to standards far higher than those we might have set for them. In their final self-reflections, multiple students identified ungrading as a significant factor in their learning. One student spoke specifically to the connection between ungrading and motivation: "This class helped foster more of an intrinsic desire to learn and work and grow as a student and a member of the world. Compared to high school, I feel much

less stressed about grades now and feel like I am learning even more and actually sort of enjoying myself, so I really appreciate the ‘ungrading’ approach.”

Through creating a book designed for an authentic audience, we believe that students actively participated in the processes of historiographical scholarship and began to understand their own role as emerging scholars. Although it was somewhat hard to measure by an objective benchmark, there is evidence to suggest that the course and the project contributed positively to students’ attitudes toward research and primary sources and their understanding of their roles as knowledge producers. While many students initially expressed trepidation about both the ungrading model and the open, collaborative project, their self-assessments frequently described transformative emotional experiences that included a growing sense of self-efficacy as well as pleasure derived from intellectual discovery and peer support. One student noted, “I realize that I learned and grew an incredible amount, [for example] how to distinguish between primary and secondary sources and how to use them effectively, how to scavenge to find exciting primary sources to analyze, how to create a collaborative book.” Another one stated: “All in all, I think [the] course helped me learn the tools of professional historians and develop my understanding of gender and sexuality. . . . Because of the un grading, I was able to take risks in projects and discussions that I would not have taken in any other class, which in turn initiated the learning process for me.” Many students remarked that it was extremely motivating to have been afforded the opportunity to produce work that was “[b]oth applicable to current situations and interesting for future readers”; to establish their own parameters for the collaborative project; and to define the structure, scope, and organization of the book itself.

Additional evidence of students’ skill development comes from our subjective assessment of the evolution of each students’ work over the duration of the course. Just as in any class, students came to the class with divergent writing, analysis, and technology skills. The work that they produced reflected these differences. The collaborative nature of the primary reader project not only held students accountable to one another, it also allowed them to showcase both their existing strengths and their developing skills. Some students, precisely because of their varied backgrounds, were able to shine even as their progress with primary source literacy might have been less than other students’. Many students readily built upon their existing skills and interests, while others took the opportunity to take risks and push themselves into more unfamiliar territory. For example, one student, a recent immigrant to the United States who was still gaining fluency with English, found writing in English to be a particular challenge. This student took a leading role in producing original cover art in addition to writing a piece about a pioneering immigration scholar.

REFLECTION

The long-standing relationship between the professor and the librarians; the institutional support for long-term, cross-departmental course design projects; and the structure, course-load, and size of the institution were all instrumental in the success of the

collaboration. The collaboration required extensive time, planning, and coordination, as well as room to continually readjust plans to accommodate unforeseen challenges and technical difficulties. For example, while the Pressbooks platform was straightforward enough that students were able to do a fair amount of the technical work themselves, the broader range of types of projects that emerged during the COVID-19 transition required that we redesign the digital presence of the class to focus more on multimodal projects, rather than stand-alone editions of a book, and expand student introductions to digital archives and research methods. The ability to combine our resources and collective expertise in a time of crisis made it possible for us to continue the project despite the unpredicted challenging circumstances. Although students' research was dramatically affected, the history librarian or the special collections librarian helped them shift to topics that they were able to research remotely. Likewise, the digital platform and the nature and format of students' projects required significant rethinking, and the digital pedagogy librarian was able to respond quickly to these changes.

The collaboration also required patience and comfort with uncertainty. To cultivate a democratic classroom, we had to let go of some of our own expectations. In some cases, this meant that we experienced disappointment that all students did not produce clean, *Chicago*-style footnotes, but, generally, we found ourselves surprised and delighted at the creativity and depth of analysis reflected in their work.

Although we saw many improvements in student engagement and the classroom dynamic, certain things were made more complicated. Perhaps in part because of the subject matter of the course and the particular classroom environment we helped cultivate, discussions often became contentious and emotional. Students frequently spoke with intensity about their intersectional identities and daily lives in ways that might have provoked defensiveness in other classrooms. But in this classroom, grounded as it was in an understanding of our collective role in surfacing histories that reflected pain and conflict, students seemed to embrace this contentiousness as a vital part of the process.

We do want to highlight another complication, however, that involved using traditional evaluation metrics to assess such an unconventional pedagogical approach. At the conclusion of the first iteration of the course, in addition to the standard quantitative student evaluations, the professor administered a detailed qualitative survey of his own design to better understand the students' experiences with the class. The professor was surprised to find an apparent contradiction between the quantitative and qualitative feedback: the quantitative metrics suggested lower and more variable student satisfaction compared to the large amounts of positive feedback from the larger qualitative survey and students' midterm and final self-assessments. He interpreted this discrepancy less as a marker of low student satisfaction, and more as a reflection of greater critical engagement. This discrepancy serves as a reminder about the limited utility of using only traditional quantitative evaluations to measure faculty performance or student satisfaction.

CONCLUSION

As the fall semester of 2019 drew to a close, students were excitedly putting the finishing touches on their chapters, freshly energized by the news that the history department was willing to fund a small print run of their book. We had always intended for this book to be used as a course text for the incoming spring semester's cohort, but we wanted to make that connection tangible for the fall students. In January 2020, at the start of the spring semester, we invited the fall semester's students back to join the spring's students for a book launch party, in the library's special collections room, with a panel discussion with members of the fall cohort. Everyone, including a number of guests who had heard about the event from their friends, the professor, or their own students, received a copy of the book. Students from the fall cohort placed a copy of the book in the university's special collections and even signed copies for their new fans. That energy, we were sure, would carry us through the semester and onto a successful second volume of student work.

In March 2020, all of that changed when the course was moved online in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the trust relationships that had been established earlier in the class allowed students to lean on one another as they faced the challenges of the moment. Students continued to engage deeply with the professor and the librarians around their coursework. The safety in knowing that they could take risks and participate authentically allowed the students to transform their research into sites for conversation and solace around topics of public health, crisis, and uncertainty, and we saw an entirely new project emerge.

Nearly everyone jettisoned their previous topic and primary source, fully embracing the opportunity to document history as they were experiencing it. Students turned to primary sources that were readily available online or even in their own attics or basements. One student, a campus EMT whose father worked as an EMT during the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s, explored their father's collection of EMT training materials from that time period. This student photocopied portions of their own EMT training materials and juxtaposed them with photocopied selections from their father's manual, creating a zine that made truly profound historical connections between the homophobia of the 1980s with the xenophobic responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. Another student interviewed dozens of friends and family members across the country and created an audio archive of their responses to the pandemic. Other projects included juxtapositions of archival material from the 1918–1919 influenza pandemic, such as letters and diary entries written by college students at the time, with contemporary photographs and news clippings.

Through examples like these, we witnessed an unexpected new learning outcome emerge: not only could students find and analyze primary sources, but they could do so in ways that were therapeutic in a time of personal and global crisis. They began to see themselves as producers not only of new knowledge, but also as creators of primary sources that serve to document a significant historical event. One student's summary of their experience in the wake of the COVID-19 transition reflected the achievement of many of our course goals, while demonstrating that they were truly able to connect with the project and the class on a deep, personal level:

This class, many days, saved me. In a time where I can't help but feel small, helpless, and sad, you have cheered us all on to remind us that we too can function as primary sources one day; we too count; we too matter; we too can make change with our words and actions. This class involved mental and emotional engagement, which I believe now should factor into every class. Look how strong we all became within our finished final projects. We didn't suppress our stressors; we emphasized them, warping a weakness into a weapon. We spoke about the unspeakable.

The act of producing authentic scholarly or creative work that has life outside of the class can be a significant motivator for students to produce high-quality work, develop their own sense of authority, and confront issues like disparities in access to information outside of the academy.⁷ However, we readily admit that our approach, while successful at achieving our goals, was extremely resource-intensive, both in time and expertise. Those interested in a similar project might find success by implementing even one or two aspects of the approach we adopted. For example, one might consider trying out ungrading on a limited scale, forgoing the complicated large-scale publication aspect, or engaging elements of open pedagogy on smaller-scale projects. We believe that any of these elements can help bring about a profound positive shift in classroom dynamics and a new way of thinking about history and primary sources. Depending on the scale of the implementation, it may be the case that significantly fewer resources are needed. It would be entirely possible for students to produce zines or other artifacts that require no technical expertise whatsoever, while still achieving similar outcomes. These kinds of projects are also highly adaptable to various institutional contexts. Our pathfinder directed students to some local institutional resources and to those that are publicly accessible, so those at institutions with fewer resources in special collections could take advantage of publicly available primary sources or even those previously used in projects like ours, which are designed with future reuse in mind.

NOTES

1. The final book can be viewed and downloaded at <https://librarypartnerspress.pressbooks.pub/gendersexuality1e/>.
2. Robin DeRosa and Rajiv Jhangiani, "Open Pedagogy," in *A Guide to Making Open Textbooks with Students* (Rebus Press), accessed May 29, 2020.
3. David Wiley, "Defining the 'Open' in Open Content and Open Educational Resources," accessed May 29, 2020; David Wiley, "What Is Open Pedagogy?" *Iterating Toward Openness*, October 21, 2013.
4. Jesse Stommel, "How to Ungrade," March 11, 2018.
5. Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* (Chicago: American Library Association, 2015), <http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework>.
6. Association of College and Research Libraries Rare Book and Manuscript Section and Society of American Archivists Joint Task Force on the Development of Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy, *Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy* (Chicago: American Library

Association, 2018), 2, <https://www2.archivists.org/sites/all/files/GuidelinesForPrimarySourceLiteracy-June2018.pdf>.

7. Amy Buckland, “More Than Consumers: Students as Content Creators,” in *Getting the Word Out: Academic Libraries as Scholarly Publishers*, ed. Maria Bonn and Mike Furlough (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, a division of the American Library Association, 2015), 193–202.

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