

One-Shots in Special Collections and Archives: Moving from Gatekeeper to Guide

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Instruction in special collections and archives spaces has evolved from the once ubiquitous show-and-tell sessions, but it remains reliant on the one-shot model where classes visit the reading room to work with primary source material in a standalone session. As Nicole Pagowsky points out, “One-shots are transactional; content is requested and then deposited into student’ minds...”¹ In special collections, this content takes the form of preselected rare books and manuscripts on a given topic, with which students interact for an hour or so before continuing on with their semester. These sessions, particularly at smaller institutions, are often limited by the breadth of the repository’s collections, which may have only a tenuous connection to course assignments and learning objectives.

One-shots in this area rely on the librarian or archivist leading the session to preselect the materials that students will examine. Identifying potential materials in finding aids and catalogs is a skill that novice student researchers often lack, and so the time-consuming work of paging materials across multiple collections needs to occur before the one-shot session takes place. Some materials may have preservation concerns that limit their use in the instruction setting, and unprocessed materials from our backlogs may be useful to fill instruction needs, but is inaccessible to anyone outside of repository staff. While current pedagogical models in special collections encourage hands-on experiences with the primary source materials, the librarian/archivist leading the session is still almost always the one choosing what those materials will be.

When the archival materials being used in an instruction session are selected by a single person, that individual has complete power over the contents of the class. Whose viewpoints are being shared? What stories are being told? The biases of the librarian/archivist influence all of these decisions—and in a field that is predominantly white, this curatorial bias often upholds institutional racism. We may no longer be gatekeepers preventing students from handling materials, but we are still mediating their direct access to the full range of archival materials. Students leave these sessions aware of only a small fraction of our holdings, and lacking the skills to independently conduct further archival research.

Scholars have shown how established systems of oppression based in race, gender, and class influence archival collections at every stage of processing and use. Privileged groups are more likely to have their records collected by a repository; Lae’l Hughes-Watkins’s work provides clear guidelines for reparative archival collecting and outreach, showing others how to inclusively collect and promote materials from previously excluded communities.² Follow-

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ing acquisition, archival materials are described in finding aids and catalog records, where oppressive and othering language is common. Jessica Tai has argued the need for archival institutions to conduct reparative redescription of finding aids and catalog records, and *Anti-Racist Description Resources*, a practical guide from the Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia, provides concrete steps to address such racism in archival description, as well as an extensive annotated bibliography of scholarship in this area.³ Once processed, archival materials become available for researchers to use; such access is influenced by structures of white supremacy, as identified by Michelle Caswell and her students.⁴ When considering online access to materials through digitization, Dorothy Berry argues that the history of unequal representation of materials from marginalized communities is a pressing issue for our field.⁵ Instruction with rare materials is no different from these other aspects of archival management; structural racism and bias are built into the current model of curated sessions.

How can we provide students with meaningful, unmediated access to the materials in our special collections and archives? It is time to steer our faculty colleagues away from traditional one-shot visits to the reading room altogether. Instruction sessions with the entire class can instead be viewed as scaffolding for independent research visits to the archives. These reimagined sessions should focus on providing students with the tools and skills to navigate finding aids; students would leave these sessions empowered to search for and identify materials that support their research assignments.⁶ Shifting the focus from viewing and handling archival materials to finding potential sources also removes the limitations imposed by the contents of our individual collections; for instance, a student may identify a source at another repository that can be better incorporated into their research.

This model will require greater collaboration with course instructors, supporting the development of assignments that can draw upon individual research using the materials in a particular archives or special collection.⁷ Of course, this approach is not a magical cure-all for the systemic injustices that exist within our corner of the academic library; curatorial bias will continue to be a concern throughout the acquisitions, processing, cataloging, and digitization processes. These problems need to be conveyed to students as part of the skill-building instruction session.

The pedagogical shift from show-and-tell to hands-on interaction that has taken place in special collections and archives during the past few decades is a notable improvement, but the time has come for those of us working in instruction with primary sources to follow the leads of our colleagues in the areas of acquisitions, processing and description, and digitization. Emphasizing archival skills instead of archival materials centers the individual student's research needs and empowers the student with unmediated access to primary source materials. The librarian/archivist no longer has the role of gatekeeper or curator, responsible for choosing the materials used in a class session; instead, they are a guide, leading students on a path to independent research with primary sources.

Notes

1. Nicole Pagowsky, "The Contested One-Shot: Deconstructing Power Structures to Imagine New Futures," *College & Research Libraries* 82, no. 3 (May 2021): 301.

2. Lae'l Hughes-Watkins, "Moving Toward a Reparative Archive: a Roadmap for a Holistic Approach to Disrupting Homogenous Histories in Academic Repositories and Creating Inclusive Spaces for Marginalized Voices," *Journal of Contemporary Archival Studies* 5, no. 6 (2018).

3. Jessica Tai, "Cultural Humility as a Framework for Anti-Oppressive Archival Description," *Journal of*

Critical Library and Information Studies 3 (2020); Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia, *Anti-Racist Description Resources* (2019), https://archivesforblacklives.files.wordpress.com/2019/10/ardr_final.pdf.

4. Michelle Caswell, "Teaching to Dismantle White Supremacy in Archives," *Library Quarterly* 87, no. 3 (July 2017): 222–35.

5. Dorothy Berry, "Centering the Margins in Digital Project Planning," *Journal of Critical Digital Librarianship* 1, no. 1 (Fall 2021): 15–22.

6. The SAA-ACRL/RBMS *Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy* (2018) provide a helpful framework for identifying learning objectives for this kind of instruction session.

7. There have been numerous, excellent case studies published on semester-long collaborations between special collections and teaching faculty, particularly in the *Case Studies on Teaching with Primary Sources* series from the Society of American Archivists. Of particular note are: Cinda Nofziger and Emily Swenson, "Success in the Long Term: Learning Objectives in a Semester-Long Research Course," *Case Studies on Teaching...* 8; and Kara Flynn, "Scaffolding Primary Source Research and Analysis in an Undergraduate History Research Methods Course," *Case Studies on Teaching...* 12.