Connecting community college students to primary sources in the archives

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ABSTRACT
Traditionally, college archives have been viewed as a place where papers, documents, photos, and materials are preserved for "someday" use. Alternatively, college archives tend to be specialized spaces reserved for academic scholars or advanced student researchers. Using a case study from the College Archives at Queensborough Community College, this paper argues that including archives as a component of undergraduate curriculum can foster an essential fit between students and primary sources. Further, this paper argues for the particular value of incorporating archival research for first-year researchers, specifically community college students. Using hands-on experience and active learning pedagogy to connect community college students to primary sources can foster unique collaborative participation and develop transferable skills that have applications for curriculum across the community college campus.

KEYWORDS
Archival research; community college archives; primary sources

Introduction

Queensborough Community College (QCC) is one of 24 colleges and graduate programs in the City University of New York. Within the five boroughs, there are seven community colleges. QCC is located in one of the most ethnically diverse populations in the United States. Our Bayside, Queens campus sits on a 37-acre site.

A collaboration between an English Department writing-intensive class and the College Archivist yielded a case study of successfully connecting community college students to primary sources in the Archives. There are approximately 204 writing-intensive courses offered each semester at QCC. Each student must successfully complete two writing-intensive courses before graduation. It is indicated across the curriculum that more writing skills are mandated for QCC students. Students who were involved in this collaboration were given some suggested research topics, but as they
browsed the collection, additional ideas and connections emerged. Primary research has been proven to stimulate interest and provide a great source of information for student research. Connecting community college students to primary sources develops transferable skills that have applications for curriculum across the community college campus.

**Literature review**

**Using archives for teaching research skills**

There is an emerging literature that attempts to establish best practices for archival instruction in a variety of library and information settings. As Olson (2009) notes, “archival instruction involves teaching students both how to use analog primary source materials in conjunction with instruction on how to access and navigate discovery tools” (87). Such tools consist of “paper-based indices, or digital finding aids, databases, catalogs and collections” (Bahde 2014, xiv). Yakel and Tibbo (2010) have developed strategies for connecting students to discovery tools “by familiarizing students with access systems and introducing them to the act of interpretation through encounters with primary source evidence” (221).

There is an increasing need to broaden the scope of college archives and justify their significance. As Dupont and Yakel (2013) make clear, “[w]e need to know and be able to demonstrate how well we are helping students become better scholars and how to help them connect with creativity and to develop life-long learning habits” (10). Archival instruction is a valuable tool for college archivists to use to build collaborations across campus and demonstrate value through direct engagement with students. It has been argued that connecting undergraduate students to primary sources can lead to the development of skills that are transferable across various disciplines and curriculum. The archives is then positioned at the center of an interdisciplinary and collaborative campus, a place that is particularly well-suited to the mission of community colleges like QCC. Hensley, Murphy, and Swain (2014) have argued that “students’ exposure to archives through archival instruction can develop critical thinking, writing skills, and even improve communication skills through the experience of negotiating a successful research experience” (104 and 108). Yakel and Torres (2003) have found that” students interpreted the concepts introduced in an orientation to the College Archives as having applicability beyond the walls of the archives, having linked them to skills that are valuable for other research and writing assignments” (69).

**Active learning pedagogy**

The pedagogical concept of active learning, which emphasizes the involvement of students as participants and collaborators in their classroom
learning experience, can be especially successful when applied to archival instruction. Bahde (2014) explores the utilization of active learning pedagogy in archival settings, focusing on the opportunities it provides students “to share, compare ideas and reason together” (142). Cooperstein and Kocevar-Weidinger (2004) emphasize critical thinking skills that active learning-centered assignments can foster, such as playing with concepts, discovering new knowledge, building on prior knowledge, and inviting students to “compare, interrogate, and challenge ideas.” “This process” the authors say, “is most successful when students are given the opportunity to share, compare ideas and reason together” (142). Similarly, Deyrup and Bloom (2013) note that the collaborative nature of active learning pedagogy lends itself particularly well to group work, which some have argued produces better results for undergraduate students working on research assignments” (55). As special collections librarians and archivists become increasingly present in the undergraduate classroom, the theory of active learning pedagogy can provide guidelines for those looking to make connections between students and primary sources.

**Case study**

In this case study, students were tasked to write a research paper on the history of QCC, where the student enrollment in the past three years ranges between 15,000-16,000 students. An ethnic analysis reveals 41.4% Caucasian, 22.6% African-American, 15.7% Hispanic, 12.1% Asian-Pacific and approximately 0.2% Native American, and others. The College Archives at QCC consist of records that document the history of the College since its founding in 1958. Materials include Board of Trustee documents from 1929 to the present, yearbooks, college catalogs, citations, original banners and prom gifts, programs, ektachrome slides, filmstrips, black and white photos, cassettes, student newspapers, student literary publications, litigation proceedings and a book on the history of the College, presidential papers and city planning documents.

The College Archivist at QCC had an opportunity to put these principles of archival instruction and active learning to the test as part of a collaboration with Professor Laura Harris’ English Composition class. The course description for English 101 reads as follows:

> Course focuses on the development of a process for producing intelligent essays that are clearly and effectively written; library work; 6,000 words of writing, both in formal themes written for evaluation and in informal writing such as the keeping of a journal. During the recitation hour, students review grammar and syntax, sentence structure, paragraph development and organization, and the formulation of thesis statements (Queensborough Community College Catalog, 2013-14 2013, 159).
As the remainder of this paper will describe, this collaboration succeeded in developing the critical thinking and research skills that students at QCC can use across their studies at the community college-level.

**The assignment**

Students in English 101 were tasked with using the College Archives to plan for and write a research paper about the history of QCC. Before visiting the Archives, students were advised to select a specific topic of interest, such as college growth, student body, development of the campus, technology, enrollment, or curriculum changes. On the day of the class visit to the Archives, the College Archivist provided a folder for each student which included an article about QCC during the 1960s that was retrieved from JSTOR. The Archivist also provided students with the following:

- A list of subjects represented in the Archives’ collection
- A form requiring each student’s signature that listed policies related to copyright and rights to production of materials
- A second form requiring each student’s signature that stated policies allowing for photocopying, scanning and photographs taken of materials
- Standard white gloves for each student to wear while using archival materials

Students were instructed to browse and select documents of their choice from the Archives’ collections. This allowed students to participate and collaborate in the learning process of the assignment and produced excited reactions from students who discovered interesting documents and shared them with their classmates. In their completed research papers, letters and correspondence accounted for 12% of the total sources used and cited by students. A letter from Robert Kennedy who once visited the QCC campus was discovered by the students. Diaries or journals accounted for approximately 6% of student sources. Students discovered a daily record kept by a professor from the Mechanical Technology department in which he recorded details of his classes and he kept photographs of the campus from the 1960s. Newspapers accounted for approximately 28% of student sources. Photographs were the most frequently used source type accounting for approximately 32% of student sources. Of particular interest to students were photographs depicting early student life on campus. Artifacts accounted for approximately 22% of student sources including banners from the first graduating class at QCC and prom gifts that students exchanged in the past.

This period of student exploration in the Archives was followed by discussions of potential research topics with the classroom instructor. Once the students had decided on their research topics, the Archivist made
suggestions to the students regarding relevant online sources, secondary literature, and additional resources to complete their research.

**Analysis**

Steps in the research process for this assignment developed as follows: Prior Knowledge, Gathering Primary Sources, Inquiry, Critical Thinking, and Additional Resources. Figure 1 demonstrates how students proceeded and used different objects in their research.

First, student participants elevated their understanding of primary resources by enhancing their ability to identify diaries, letters, transcripts, court decisions, recordings of interviews, speeches, maps, photographs, artifacts, etc. For each of these resource types, students were required to observe and analyze materials closely. For example, when working with historical photographs, students learned to apply criteria with which to determine approximate dates, including close observations of clothing, environment, hair styles, etc. that were represented in the photographic images.

Second, students developed lines of Inquiry driven by questioning, thoughtful investigation, and sense-making based on the information collected in order to develop new understandings. This was accomplished primarily through student selections of research topics, which were reached by exploring archival material independently and making connections.

![Image of Figure 1: Objects and content.](image)

*Figure 1. Objects and content.*
between their own understanding of the College and its history (Prior Knowledge) and the archival material they were encountering first-hand during the class visit (Gathering Primary Documents). Deyrup and Bloom (2013) describes this process as follows: “Students are looking for the perfect source, one that answers every aspect of their research question and gives complete and balanced evidence” (127). Students begin with the gathering of information, then the evaluation of that information, leading to the synthesis of that analysis into a new whole.

Finally, students developed their Critical Thinking skills by constructing their own understandings, drawing conclusions, creating new knowledge, and sharing their knowledge with others. Students generate new standards for analysis and comprehension by emphasizing critical questioning of information, which is given equal importance as the act of information discovery. Critical questioning leads to students determining what Additional Resources are necessary to complete the research paper.

Figure 2 shows stages students proceeded through as they researched and collaborated ideas.

Estimated percentages are as follows: in the Inquiry stage, 20% of the QCC students question and make sense of information. In Prior

![Figure 2](image)

**Figure 2.** Students’ research and collaborated ideas.
Knowledge, 10% of the QCC students know how to value information. While gathering Primary Documents, 30% of the QCC students evaluate documents and determine if this information is sufficient to complete research. Finally, in the Critical Thinking skills stage, 20% of the QCC students decide at this point if additional resources are needed, seeking the Internet or databases. As the process gets closer to ending, 20% of the QCC students include more information to supplement what is found in the Archives and search for additional documents.

Bahde (2014) notes that “[w]ith object-based learning, students often raise further questions and open new, unexpected lines of inquiry as they examine the complex human relationships, activities and beliefs that the artifact reflects” (xvi). This case study reveals another type of learning process that involves peer learning with primary sources where students work in pairs to analyze documents and interpret ideas to present to the entire class.

**Discussion**

Management of student expectations is key to creating sustained interest in a specific research topic. Students may bring with them a general idea of a research topic that they hope to find and explore through direct engagement with primary documents enhances their ideas and can lead to new pathways of exploration and research. As the instructor introduces the student to primary documents to read and discover, their interest to gather more documentation relevant to the event increases. As the students actively examine primary sources, they encounter the need to either prove or disprove information located in order to develop their research narrative.

As students returned from their period of exploration in the Archives and began evaluating the sources they had gathered, interest peaked as each student viewed other students’ findings. Some asked, “Did this really happen?” Evaluating handwriting, fragile documents, and events that occurred before these researchers were born initiated interesting discussions among professors and students. As a result of these encounters, students were better connected to the content they observed, evaluated, and decided on how their sources contributed to their research.

The College Archivist explained what to expect in the College Archives, how to navigate to find information needed and the significance of how the materials are organized. As boxes relevant to their topics were located, students returned to share their findings. Each primary source allowed the researcher to respond first-hand to the items viewed. The student researcher decided how the information fits. A different perspective was possible at this point which led the researcher to continue and to delve
further in databases, the internet or to continue seeking more primary sources to substantiate a theory or to prove a hunch.

**Conclusion**

This paper illustrates an opportunity for classroom faculty in English, History, Journalism, Speech, Education, the Social Sciences, Technology, Mechanical Technology, Business, and Computer Resources to explore and discover ways to incorporate and make the history of the College relevant through collaboration with the College Archives. A lesson learned that is especially noteworthy is to see that the archival instruction assignment featured in this paper is adaptable to so many courses in the curriculum. A future project would be to focus on integrating the College Archives into different courses from different disciplines in the next semester in order to continue to develop tools for interdisciplinary archival instruction. Continuing conversations with department chairs and faculty will lead to further discussions on how to increase the use of the Archives. QCC regularly hosts a program called “Campus Conversations” which allows faculty to discuss various topics of interest. An emphasis on the Archives could be the focus of one of these conversations. As part of the conversation, one or two faculty that have used the Archives could elaborate on their experience. Each faculty that participates could share the outcome of using the Archives and provide feedback to others.

As noted in meetings with the archivist, professor, and students, active learning is an essential component of the learning process. Schunk (2012) addresses the importance of activity in learning. He states “whether development progresses in natural fashion or whether more and varied experiences can promote it—this [process] has important implications for teaching because it speaks to the issue of how active students should be. If activity is important, then lessons need to incorporate hands-on activities” (451). In Nimer and Daines (2012) description of Course Objectives in Archives and Archival Research, he noted that students could learn “to locate primary sources in local and national databases, indexes, and other utilities, students could identify methods employed by social scientist to analyze primary sources, and students should apply their knowledge of archives and documentary research to their own writing” (17).

As educators seek diverse ways to encourage critical thinking and research, more effort needs to be made to assess how students learn. The Association for College and Research Libraries (ACRL) has documented the need to develop assessments for archival research. Although the ACRL Information Literacy Standards for Higher Education have been widely adopted and incorporated across disciplines, research in library science has
much work to do in considering instructional strategies for connecting students to primary source materials. As Hensley, Murphy, and Swain (2014) note, “the social sciences and humanities are just beginning to explore ways in which undergraduates can contribute to knowledge in a discipline by asking original research questions, examining primary sources and creating new content” (97). In 2001, the ACRL formed a Task Force on Special Collections that was charged with defining core competencies, but these competencies are still being discussed and reviewed and aligned with the ACRL Framework (Association of College and Research Libraries 2016). As information literacy guidelines are more explicitly stated, more attention must continue to focus on best practices for teaching archival research. Beginning in July 2017, the new home for ACRL’s Framework Advisory Board will be the Student Learning and Information Literacy Committee. The goal of this committee is to continue exploring resources in this area. As carefully designed tools are utilized, the process for determining student success in the archives will be clarified and strengthened.

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