

ARL Library Impact Research Report

Improving Primary Source Literacy Learning Outcomes through a Community-Centered Archives Approach

Krystal Tribbett (UCI), Derek Quezada (UCI), and Jimmy Zavala (UCLA)
spcoll@uci.edu

UCI Libraries

Abstract

The University of California, Irvine (UCI) Libraries used its Humanities Core program, a year-long undergraduate freshman course that introduces students to the development of scholarly research through the use of primary and secondary source resources, to compare and contrast how two forms of primary source workshops achieve initial learning outcomes. While both workshops administered by UCI taught primary source literacy, one incorporated the principles and practices of community-centered archives and included primary source materials focused on underrepresented histories. Thus, in addition to testing the efficacy of the Rare Book and Manuscripts Section/Society of American Archivists (RBMS/SAA) Guidelines For Primary Source Literacy, UCI examined the impact of incorporating more inclusive histories into workshops on the learning outcomes of students.

UCI asked, "When students 'see themselves' represented in archives, do they experience an affective response that has an effect on how and what they learn through primary source literacy workshops?" UCI used entrance and exit surveys as assessment tools. Survey results show that both forms of UCI's primary source workshops improved students' familiarity with archives and comfortability analyzing primary source materials. Survey results, however, show that the learning outcomes achieved during the community-centered archives workshop exceeded those achieved during the traditional primary literacy workshop. These findings suggest incorporating more inclusive histories into workshops and discussing the importance of representation in archives improves the learning outcomes of students. When students "see themselves" represented in archives, they experience an affective response that impacts how and what they learn through primary source literacy workshops.

Objectives

This research aimed to address the following questions:

- Did the entrance and exit surveys demonstrate a greater comfort with the learning outcomes for primary source literacy?
- Did the community sessions demonstrate a greater degree of comfort with the learning outcomes for primary source literacy than the traditional ones
- Given our experience, do we feel that entrance and exit surveys are a valid form of assessing primary source literacy?
- How would we approach the assessment differently?
- Given our conclusions, what are our recommendations for improving increasing familiarity with learning outcomes for primary source literacy?

Furthermore, we sought to determine the need for a sixth learning objective for the SAA/RBMS Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy focused on affective responses to archives.

Methods

UCI aimed to evaluate how two forms of primary source workshops administered to undergraduate students as part of UCI's Humanities Core program meet the learning outcomes outlined by the Society of American Archivist (SAA) Council. One workshop we refer to as "traditional." It used traditional archival materials, which we define as items that document dominant historical narratives. The other workshop we refer to as "community-centered." It used community-centered archival materials, which we define as items that document the histories of communities underrepresented in the historical record.

In order to test our hypothesis, that when students "see themselves" represented in archives, they experience an affective response that has an effect on how and what they learn through primary source literacy workshops, UCI administered Likert scale entrance and exit surveys as assessment tools. The surveys were designed on a linear scale and were multiple choice. The scale of the surveys ranged from 1 to 5, with 1 being the least comfortable and 5 being the most comfortable. Only one of the 9 questions asked was open ended. We chose to add this question in the hopes of gathering more detailed, personal responses from students about their workshop experience.

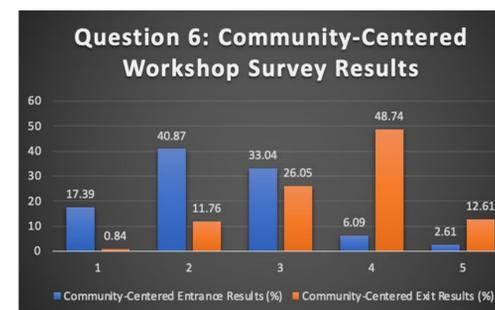
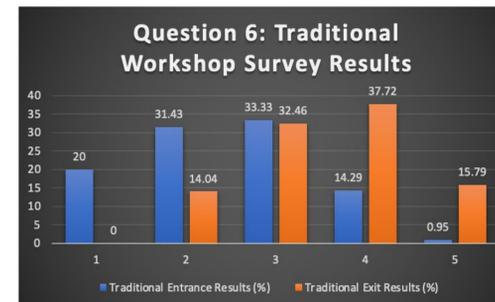
The goal of the surveys was to measure students' familiarity with archives and how comfortable they felt analyzing primary sources before and after the workshops. In particular, we wanted to evaluate the impact of students learning about community-centered archives and whether that enabled students to feel more comfortable and confident when analyzing primary sources.



Results

Two hundred and twenty-one students took UCI's workshop entrance survey, and 235 students took the exit survey. Survey results show that both forms of UCI's primary source workshops improved students' familiarity with archives and comfortability analyzing primary source materials. Survey results, however, show that the learning outcomes achieved during the community-centered archives workshop exceeded those achieved during the traditional primary literacy workshop. After taking the community-centered workshop, a greater percentage of students would indicate their comfort level with archival analysis above average (in the 4 or 5 range).

Sample survey results:



"This was a really great experience and I'm glad I got the opportunity to get exposure to these unique primary source documents!"

"I enjoyed the workshop a lot! I previously thought that I'd be dealing with very old manuscripts, but I learned that some collection materials can be relatively new. Great job!"

Value

Based on our data, the research fulfilled the objectives of the project and helped address the originating issue. The data demonstrates increased student engagement and understanding of archives when working with materials they relate and connect with. Incorporating principles of community archives into instruction curriculum benefits students to think critically about power dynamics in archives and understand the significance of archives as primary sources that have the ability to shape historical narratives. Intentionally selecting archival material representing historically marginalized communities in large archival institutions proved to be of value to students for a couple of reasons: It allowed students to connect with that material, especially those who come from marginalized communities, which in turn enabled students to engage more with the material. Hence, community archives principles in primary source instruction had a significant positive impact on student learning.

The research project proved to be worthwhile not just for students but also for library instructors in Special Collections and Archives in terms of incorporating community archives into the primary source instruction program. The research project had a direct impact on the instruction program's curriculum in efforts to provide students with a platform to think critically about archives.

Lessons Learned

A lesson learned from this research project was the need for collections and archival material reflective of community archives. The archival material used for this project was limited, especially since the material had to align with Humanities Core theme of Animals and Culture. It proved challenging to find enough archival resources that related to Animals and Culture and centered community archives. This underscores the importance of having diverse collections representing multiple communities and narratives that can be utilized for students to engage with.

Since this project was carried out during the Humanities Core program, most of the instruction sessions were back-to-back, resulting in workshops being rushed. The research team decided to administer the workshops one after another - one workshop incorporated the principles and practices of community-centered archives and included primary source materials focused on underrepresented histories while the other workshop did not. Furthermore, the time of the workshops was limited, resulting in students being rushed when analyzing primary sources. Expanding the time of classes would be beneficial to give students enough time to look over the material, especially since students rotated looking at two-three different items to examine during the workshops.

Future Research

UCI Libraries Special Collections and Archives conduct primary source literacy workshops each year. Thus, in the future, if we would like to continue to gather data on the effectiveness of our workshops we can. Our recommendation would be to incorporate entrance and exit surveys into our workshop plans. Moving forward, it may be necessary to modify the surveys to best reflect the current workshop format and any new questions regarding the workshop's efficacy.

Recommendations for future research include taking this project a step further and have students directly intervene in the collection development policies of the department by allowing students to identify material they would like to see as part of Special Collections. How can students intervene directly in collection development to fill in gaps in Special Collections and Archives? How can Special Collections and Archives work with students to accomplish this given that students are one of the primary audiences that Special Collections and Archives engages with?

Select Bibliography

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