Top tips for teaching with digitised primary sources

As university teaching around the world moves online, many instructors in the humanities and social sciences will be looking for new or additional digital content and assignment ideas. This is a difficult and time-consuming task, not least when paired with the additional challenge of supporting students during a period of great anxiety. The response of faculty has been extraordinary, and the Outreach team at *Adam Matthew Digital* is trying to support as many people as possible in meeting these challenges. Over the years, we have met with faculty members around the world who use our primary source collections in their teaching, some in physical classrooms, others in virtual learning environments.

We put our heads together, and pulled some of our favourite suggestions from faculty members who use online primary sources in their teaching…

1. Switching to online is different to starting online

Designing and teaching online classes is a specialism, and no one should expect you or your students to acquire online teaching skills overnight. Do what you can, and base it around the needs of you and your students. Be mindful that not everyone has access to the technologies that underpin many classes that start online. Dr Marissa Greenberg, from the University of New Mexico, offers excellent insights on her online pedagogy blog with posts on *'Staying healthy while teaching online'* and many other topics.

2. There is no such thing as a 'digital native'

Don't assume that students in their late teens and early twenties were born with digital literacy skills beyond those you and I have. If you are assigning a digitised archival collection an initial session (even a short 5-10 minute one) can help the class navigate the resource and think about it critically. You can see some examples of introductions from instructors who have built courses around online primary sources here:

- First World War
- Colonial America

3. What is a primary source?

Although the means of accessing primary sources online is different to visiting the physical archive, the process of analysing those sources remains similar. Take a look at our interview with Dr. Robert Cassanello, an associate professor of history at the University of Central Florida. Robert uses *African American Communities* and *Race Relations in America* in his teaching, and explains eloquently how he introduces undergraduate students to primary sources.

4. Critical questioning of sources

Analysis of archival material should always consider questions such as how and why a document has been preserved and catalogued. On top of this, digitised content requires us to ask why has it been digitised, and by whom. Whose voices can and cannot be heard? For practical suggestions on how to ask these questions in the classroom, read Professor Jessica Stern's comments on how she introduced the CO 5 files in *Colonial America* to her students.

5. Digital and material archives

Some of the most inspiring case studies we have are those that have students use both physical and digitised archives. In a totally online environment, this is difficult to recreate. You could try asynchronous assignments, where students explore digitised material at their own pace. You could try looking at the similarities and differences between the catalogue data for digitised items and the original archival record. And it is always worth asking questions like how digital tools transform research methodology; how the online environment can offer multiple and non-linear pathways to finding archival material; and how the embodied experience of the archive is different to the virtual realm of the screen.

6. Secondary literature as a pathway to primary sources

Many faculty we work with use primary source assignments to build skills in testing and contesting arguments in secondary sources. Some suggest the students read one of the essays written by consultant editors for a collection, and then use the primary sources within that collection to interrogate the editor's argument. In another example, students at UC Davis selected primary sources from *Everyday Life and Women in America* to add to Nancy Cott's sourcebook *Root of Bitterness: Documents of the Social History of American Women*. The students had to post a piece to the class online discussion board explaining how their chosen primary source would add something that was not already present in Cott's volume.

7. Have students demonstrate digital skills and presenting, where possible

Online course pages and discussion boards are a great place to post work and links to digitised primary sources. Given the right conditions, students could be encouraged to give a more public presentation of their ideas in an online environment. Students have worked with our collections to write blogs, create interactive timelines and maps (we often work with tutors who use Northwestern's KnightLab resources for this), and edit Wikipedia. Online sources offer an ability to simultaneously build skills in digital scholarship and publishing, and increase understanding of how digital information is produced and published. Just be sure to discuss copyright and permissions with students before reusing digitised images.