

Waiting for Web 2.0: Archives and Teaching Undergraduates in a Digital Age

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For nearly a decade, I have assigned a research paper in my course on U.S. Women's History to 1870 that asks students to find a collection of primary sources by or about a woman to use as the basis for their essays. When I first started teaching the course in the late 1990s, my students would look in our school library for published collections of letters, diaries, and other documents. But in recent years the search has been almost entirely online, in part because I've encouraged that, in part because that is where the students look first, and in part because there are so many more primary source collections available online. Digital archival collections at the Library of Congress, National Archives, the Massachusetts Historical Society, New York Public Library, and the Library of Virginia (just to name a few) allow students in the class access to many more perspectives on the history of women in the United States than ever before. But though the sources are plentiful, the spread of the Web and myriad accompanying tools have brought about their own set of opportunities and problems for educators in colleges and universities, as well as for archives and archivists.

While Robert Townsend's essay explores the perspective of historians and the historical profession with regard to Archives 2.0, this essay will focus on the impact of digital technologies with regard to teaching with archival materials and will provide some speculation about other ways in which these technologies might be used to more actively engage students and teachers. It is heavily influenced by my own experiences as a U.S.

historian teaching undergraduate history and American studies majors at the University of Mary Washington, a public, mostly undergraduate, liberal arts institution in Fredericksburg, Virginia,¹ and therefore should not be considered broadly representative. Like Dr. Townsend, I am sensitive to the demands of archival users in the digital age and the ways in which those demands can be in tension with the core values of the archival community in terms of collecting, preserving, and sharing the array of materials for which they are responsible. These comments are offered in a grateful spirit for all that archivists do.²

Thinking about the ways that those of us who teach history to college students address the question of archives, we can see that much has changed over the last ten to fifteen years. When I began teaching in the late 1990s, teaching with archival records typically meant assigning published document collections, making copies of unpublished materials gathered in my own research and passing them out to the class, or perhaps using transparencies to show a class what nineteenth-century handwriting looked like. Some of my colleagues had carousel after carousel of slides, painstakingly assembled over the years from a variety of archival and published sources. Eventually, I began to scan microfilmed census records or letters between Civil War-era Virginians, using a projector to share those archival materials with my students as part of our lectures and discussions.

When I started teaching, I simply could not expect my undergraduate students to do substantive research in archival materials. Although we have a terrific group of research librarians, schools our size simply do not have the archival collections that larger schools do. Certainly, we had a few students make road trips to nearby archives (UMW is conveniently located between the significant archival collections in Richmond and Washington, D.C.). Still, in the late 1990s I couldn't *expect* research in archives (especially for non-U.S. topics) for undergraduates. Primary source work, which is central to our expectations for our majors, was largely done from the available printed archival materials. When I was a PhD student at Johns Hopkins in the 1990s, my advisor taught me well the importance of talking to archivists about the collections with which they worked—advice I and my colleagues passed on to our students. Realistically, however,

undergraduate student interaction with archivists was often limited to phone and perhaps e-mail. Still, an archivist's expert advice was acknowledged and could prove valuable in steering students who took advantage of the opportunity.

Today, of course, we are in the midst of a Web-based "Digital Age." Although this book is full of examples of Web 2.0 tools being used by archives and archivists, I would argue that currently the relationship between the college classroom and archives is largely Web 1.0, not Web 2.0. In other words, so far the biggest impact of the digital age on university educators' use of archival materials has been in the area of accessibility to digital and digitized documents, not in the area of interactive social media.

Still, that accessibility has made it much easier to bring primary source documents, videos, and full-color images into the classroom from outside of one's own research. My syllabi now regularly include embedded digital files or links to various sources from across the Web.³ As for student research, although students are even less likely to do research in physical archives than just a decade ago, they now have a wide array of digitized archival collections available to them online. From a professor's standpoint, the physical distance to actual archives matters much less than it once did, especially if educators are just looking for a variety of topics/sources for their students to work on (as opposed to specific sources for a particular advanced research project). Even then, for faculty working on their own projects, or for those who work with graduate students, an incredible array of specialized research can be done using existing digitized collections, as I found out for myself when I was able to access the Library of Virginia's online Confederate pension records to complete my own project on veteran families.⁴

The world of teaching archival research in the digital age is not all flowers and sunshine, however. The abundance of digital archival records can be overwhelming to some students. At the same time, only certain collections are available and often only certain parts of them. In fact, I often hear from frustrated students who expect all materials to be online, and, unfortunately, they often don't seem to understand my explanations

of the costs of digitization and online curation. Another issue is that sometimes those sources are hidden in the larger array of online information that is not necessarily archival or even scholarly. Partly to combat this issue, my colleagues and I constantly struggle to convince students to search beyond the first page of Google results.⁵ Even after students find a digital archival collection, finding individual sources can be a frustrating process. In my experience, many undergraduate students have difficulty locating, using, and citing sources in online collections.

Another issue for educators working with undergraduate students and archival collections has to do with the speed of change online. This issue manifests in several forms. First, there is the simple issue that what is available online is constantly changing as more archival collections are posted to the Web, seemingly every day. Generally that's a good problem to have, but it does mean that professors have difficulty keeping up with what's available for their students. Second, educators (and the research librarians who help them) have to spend a great deal of time keeping up with changing user interfaces (UI) of databases, repositories, and archives to help students navigate those collections. Finally, the rapidly changing nature of online archival sources (in terms of quantity, interface, even Web addresses) is a problem for classes and curriculums. In other words, a syllabus and class lessons (complete with guides to navigating particular online archives, links to specific examples, or online primary documents used for essays) created for one semester may need to be completely revised, perhaps even in the middle of the semester. On several occasions I have been left scrambling mid-semester because online documents I wanted students to use for a class project were no longer at the same URL as they had been just weeks before. For some professors this instability results in a reluctance to use online archival materials for class work. Perhaps the larger lesson is that we educators need to be teaching (and practicing) adaptability to information retrieval in a variety of ways, rather than focusing on specific databases, archives, or research. In other words, we have seen the problem, and it is at least partly us.

A related problem for educators teaching with digital collections is the occasional loss of access to digital repositories or sources on which

we have come to depend. In some cases digital collections drop offline because they are no longer supported by funding streams or even, perhaps, their creators. Even if such “orphaned” collections remain online, they may have outdated software or even digital security issues.⁶ In other cases the cost of supporting digital projects might result in a change in ownership and accessibility of resources, causing an effective hiding of materials behind pay walls. To cite one example, I used to assign students in my women’s history class a wide array of readings from the Women and Social Movements in the United States history site when it was first available as a freely available array of online edited document projects. Several years ago, however, most of the site became part of a subscription service from Alexander Street Press.⁷

More generally, this issue of accessibility of archival collections behind pay walls can have several key effects from the perspective of educators. First, it creates a digital divide—or more accurately, contributes to an existing digital divide—regarding archival materials because financial resources dictate which institutions can access these collections.⁸ Second, it creates a situation in which the material behind the pay wall might as well be hidden or unpublished; because of the restrictions, it does not become part of the larger discussion within history classes or graduate theses, making it less likely to be studied further.

Another issue for those of us who teach with online archival sources concerns the numerous questions raised about source and authority of materials posted on the Web. One of the implications of the Web’s seemingly seamless presentation of its plethora of sources has been the profound blurring of the identity of the institutional home of digitized original documents. Though professional historians pay great attention to the author and source of original documents, it’s not always immediately clear, even to us, whether digital reproductions of these documents came from archives, museums, academics, genealogists, or independent researchers. And, though the distance and changes from the original source material obviously matter a great deal (e.g., transcribed versus digitally reproduced, selections versus complete collections), which academic repository hosts it seems to matter much less than it used to.⁹ And if that’s increasingly true

for professional historians, then it is easy to imagine what that blurring might mean for students just being introduced to the basic tenets of the historical profession, despite our constant efforts to make them aware of the need to verify the reliability of online sources.

Of course, primary source documents online are not all published by academic institutions, archival or otherwise. Teaching about sources and authority has become even more important and complicated in the digital age because of the posting of archival sources by enthusiasts, semi-professional historians, students, and for-profit sites.¹⁰ Of course, we all want to see more and more sources available online, and many of these sites are quite well done, with all the scholarly rigor of even the most skeptical of historians. However, the fact is that the quality of these sites is not always as high as scholars and archivists want them to be. Some of them contain typos, poor transcriptions, bad metadata, or unusable scans, or they simply replicate inaccurate or discredited information. Given that this is the case, the blurring of the origins of archival sources that occurs on the Web becomes a serious issue for history professors looking to teach their students how to find sources online. My colleagues and I spend a great deal of class time on what has been called “digital literacy” or “information fluency” (among other names), which often amounts to an updated version of the long-held goal for our students to approach all sources with a critical eye.

One particularly revealing example of the potential perils of online sources and the need for a skeptical approach happened in the fall of 2008, with T. Mills Kelly’s history course, “Lying About the Past,” at George Mason University. Dr. Kelly had the class create an online historical hoax to get the students in the class to think about digital publishing, online sources, authority, and ethics. The fifteen undergraduates chose to create a fake student working on a fake project about a fake pirate, complete with YouTube “interviews,” an entry in *Wikipedia*, even a “Last Will and Testament.” The hoax took in a number of people, including a few academic bloggers and one from *USA Today*. Importantly the class and the hoax reinforce the questions raised in the digital age of trust, value, and

the potential issues of online sources (not incidentally core components of digital literacy).¹¹

Returning to the broader topic of this book, my sense is that, despite the great value of digitally opening many archives, the potential of high level, two-way interactivity between higher education teachers and their students on one hand and archivists on the other, what we might characterize as an essential part of Archives 2.0, is mostly unrealized at the moment. There are certainly efforts by the Library of Congress and other archival institutions to engage the public in Web 2.0-style conversations around documents and images,¹² but these attempts are rarely aimed directly at the university classroom.

One area in which I see an obvious chance to build connections between collegiate classrooms and archives is in the area of increased access to individual archivists themselves. When I was doing my own research as a graduate student, Minor Weisiger at the Library of Virginia and E. Lee Shepard at the Virginia Historical Society were invaluable in directing me to sources critical for my own research. So where is that personal direction toward archival resources in the digital age? In addition to the online collections guides that many archives have available, a number of archival websites have a clear place to contact them for more information.¹³ Moving forward, the key is making sure that such features mirror the partnership I felt with archivists when I told them about my research, rather than the flat “book report” style request for “all information on X” that some students use in soliciting help from archivists and librarians. It is, of course, incumbent on educators to help their students understand how to approach archivists in appropriate ways.

In a similar vein, archivists can move further into the realm of digital conversations by using Web 2.0 tools to direct people to archival resources. At this point, however, I am aware of only limited use of social networking aimed at college students (undergraduate or graduate) regarding archives. My students certainly use Facebook, and a few use Twitter, but they rarely see these as tools directly related to their education or their research, nor do they look to such tools for information on their scholarship (unless they are consulting with their fellow students for advice).¹⁴ There is perhaps

an opportunity here for careful experimentation.¹⁵ Students at Mary Washington have begun to engage with members of the larger academic community, if not archivists, in the blogs assigned as part of various classes.¹⁶

Looking forward, I see a number of possible directions for Archives 2.0 and higher education, (with the caveat that predicting the future is something that the study of history tells us we don't do well). First, I have the sense that archives, students, and educators are just beginning to explore the possibilities of targeted crowdsourcing. Admittedly, there are reasons for archivists to be hesitant in having students digitizing or tagging archival collections, and there are limits to how much that often-repetitious process is useful to students from an educational perspective after a certain point, but there are also many reasons to further encourage collaboration between archives and students to enable better archival online resources.¹⁷ Working with local institutions, faculty, and classes to create, present, and improve digital versions of archival materials that the archives don't have the time or resources to create themselves can be a good thing for everyone. Use of free, open-source, content-management tools like WordPress and Omeka, combined with student work, faculty knowledge, and archival expertise, can make more resources available in useful, and yes, rigorous ways.¹⁸

Second, I think we are close to seeing the democratizing of data-mining for historical purposes. Increasingly, digitized archival collections will be the foundation for broad data-mining projects, not just from specialized academics, but from a broad spectrum of people, including undergraduate and graduate students mentored by a growing group of digitally literate historians.

Third, we need to be prepared for the incipient mobile revolution. Archivists (and anyone working on creating digital versions of archival documents) need to think about how to present material so that it can be accessed and easily consumed on smartphones and other small-screen devices (including ebook readers, netbooks, and slates/tablets). Though I won't presume to predict the specific devices that will be successful in the university classroom of the next five to ten years, it seems clear that we

are reaching a kind of critical mass with the number of smartphones and other portable devices owned by students. I see the real possibility of future courses in which my students search and find archival documents on these devices in and out of class.¹⁹

Fourth, I believe we need to recognize that because of the availability of online sources without the help of archivists (or even the conscious use of archives) there is a potential trend away from involving archivists in education; yet we need to make sure that students and educators keep archivists in the discussion of those archival sources. How? By further encouraging the online presence of archivists who continue to serve as experts, directing scholars and students to digital and analog resources in archives. Web 2.0 is certainly one way to share that expertise, as evidenced by Facebook, Twitter, blogs, and the many examples demonstrated in the other essays in this book. Though these tools can serve as broadcast channels to many, they also provide the opportunity for response from the various communities they serve.

I also see a few areas where archivists can do better at meeting the needs of university history faculty in teaching, and I'd like to offer three specific suggestions. First, it's essential to assure that there are persistent, stable URLs for websites hosting online resources. Certainly it's unavoidable that data is restructured, sites are reworked, and changes must occasionally happen, but as a professor, I can attest that coming back to an electronic syllabus after one semester and finding all the links broken is an incredibly frustrating experience. And it's even more problematic if you're writing anything for print and are attempting to cite sources.²⁰

Second, user interface matters a great deal. Students and faculty who can't figure out how to use a site with a little playing around just don't use the site. A colleague of mine at another university uses only one database or archive in a class each semester because learning, and teaching, multiple interfaces for multiple digital repositories is simply not worth it to her. So, time spent on developing the user interface for an archive is time well spent.


Finally, continue to and expand on advertising your efforts to open archives through a variety of social media channels. Twitter and blogs

seem to be the best avenues at the moment I'm writing this to reach professors and students who are most involved in the online world. It helps that the default for blogs and Twitter tweets is to be searchable in Google. It makes it more likely that archives' hard-fought digitized collections will be seen. Facebook is another option, though it may take some work to convince students and faculty to think of it as a tool for finding out about scholarly resources. Facebook's more than 500 million users makes it hard to ignore (although more and more students are telling me that as their parents are joining, it doesn't matter to them as much as it used to). Still, the larger point here is that archives shouldn't place all their advertising eggs in one technological basket and should be prepared to explore other channels as they arise. Even then, however, such Web 2.0 technologies won't reach all in higher education, so it is incumbent on digitally enabled faculty to help advertise these resources to both our students and our less digital colleagues.

In the end, history educators in university classrooms need to be able to connect with archives, archival projects, and archivists more than we currently do. Certainly, faculty need to do a better job of locating existing efforts at Archives 1.0 and 2.0, and that means staying current with the changes in the field and learning what's available digitally. Teaching faculty need to make themselves and their students more available to archives and archivists for two-way conversations and collaborations, but archives and archivists also need to reach out more to teaching faculty and their students.²¹ Doing so would get us closer to the interactive and collaborative promise of Archives and Web 2.0. Going beyond existing efforts with Web-based technologies is critically important to the continued relevance of archives in the preservation, creation, and teaching of history.

Notes

- ¹ Formerly known as Mary Washington College, UMW has about 4,000 undergraduates and 1,000 graduate students. My class sizes range from 35 for introductory classes to 25 for upper-level courses like U.S. Women's History to 15 for seminars. There is no graduate program in history or American Studies.
- ² Much of my thinking has also been influenced by my sister, Kara McClurken, who is head of Preservation Services at the University of Virginia. Thanks also to the advice of my colleagues at UMW. Any errors in this essay are not their fault.
- ³ Links to all my course websites and syllabi can be found at <http://mclurken.org>.
- ⁴ These records and many others are available from LVA's terrific new site for its digital collections, <http://www.virginiamemory.com/> (accessed September 1, 2010).
- ⁵ Even searching better within Google will result in better results. The following Web page shows my attempt to point out Google's many search options to a first-year seminar: <http://ted2009.umw-blogs.org/2009/09/15/research-links/>.
- ⁶ See "Graceful Degradation," Bethany Nowviskie and Dot Porter's study of digital humanities projects whose funding or support has ended, at <http://nowviskie.org/2009/graceful-degradation/> (accessed September 1, 2010).
- ⁷ The site was begun in 1997 by Thomas Dublin and Katherine Kish Sklar at <http://womhist.binghamton.edu/>, while the current site (as of January 2010), with a quarter of the projects still available, is at <http://womhist.alexanderstreet.com/>.
- ⁸ Our libraries regularly have to make tough choices about how many and which digital resources they can afford to subscribe to.
- ⁹ The ability to find archival materials through search engines and to link directly to those archival materials (or "deep-linking") without ever needing to consult an institution's own guides or directories exacerbates that blurred sense of archival location.
- ¹⁰ For the last group, I'm thinking of Ancestry.com and Footnote.com, though there are others.
- ¹¹ T. Mills Kelly, "You Were Warned," edwired, December 18, 2008, <http://edwired.org/?p=418>; Jen Howard, "Teaching by Lying: Professor Unveils 'Last Pirate' Hoax," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, December 18, 2008, <http://chronicle.com/article/Teaching-by-Lying-Professor/1420> (accessed September 1, 2010); *Lying About the Past*, course blog, <http://chnm.gmu.edu/history/faculty/kelly/blogs/h389/> (accessed September 1, 2010); *Last American Pirate*, (fake) blog, <http://lastamerican-pirate.net/> (accessed September 1, 2010). The *USA Today* post seems to have been taken down as of January 2010. The comments on Mills Kelly's post certainly point to the need for skeptical approaches to online materials but also highlight both the power and the fragility of online communities (called "trust networks" by one commenter) built through Web 2.0 tools like Twitter and blogs. Some of the people taken in by the hoax (including me) did so because the people in their network of friends and colleagues "tweeted" about it as if it were a real student project.
- ¹² Here I'm particularly thinking of partnership projects like Flickr *Commons*, begun in 2008. See <http://www.flickr.com/commons/> (accessed September 1, 2010).
- ¹³ As of September 2010, the Virginia Historical Society had "Ask a Librarian" and "Ask a Curator" forms at http://www.vahistorical.org/contact_us.htm, while the Library of Virginia used a general contact form at <http://www.lva.virginia.gov/about/contact.asp>. Some university libraries have begun to offer online "chat with a librarian" capabilities to their patrons as well.
- ¹⁴ This is not to say that some archives have not been using Web 2.0 tools to reach out. I and a growing number of my colleagues use Twitter and blogs to learn more about historical materials in many forms, both from formal archival accounts (e.g., VHS's @vahistorical), but also from

individual scholars, librarians, and archivists at various institutions (e.g., LOC's Susan Garfinkel,  footnotesrising).

- ¹⁵ *Careful* because some students may want to keep separate their academic and social online experiences.
- ¹⁶ UMW has its own WordPress blogging system, known as *UMWblogs.org*, with more than 4,600 users and some 3,600 blogs (as of October 2010). Students use blogs as reflections, journals, project sites, and publishing platforms. For example, one student's reflection on a Revolutionary War soldier's diary led to a comment from an outside scholar. See <http://bhupp.umwblogs.org/2008/09/01/private-joseph-plumb-martin-diary/>.
- ¹⁷ I would hope that as collaboration on digital projects and online resources between archivists, librarians, museum professionals, and academics becomes more common, it will become easier to figure out ways to include undergraduate and graduate students in these digital archiving projects. We're experimenting with that at Mary Washington in senior seminar classes like "Digital History." See <http://dh2010.umwblogs.org> and <http://digitalhistory.umwblogs.org>.
- ¹⁸ WordPress is free blogging/publishing software and Omeka is a free digital collections manager and online presentation tool intended for museums and educational institutions. See <http://wordpress.com> and <http://omeka.org>.
- ¹⁹ For more on mobile computing in higher education as a fast-approaching issue, see the 2010 Horizon Report from the New Media Consortium and the EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative at <http://www.nmc.org/publications/2010-horizon-report>, especially pp. 9–13; see also the *Digital Campus* podcasts from the Center for History and New Media at <http://digitalcampus.tv>, especially episodes 36 and 50.
- ²⁰ This problem, of course, is larger than just archives. It is a general issue of the Web. I am concerned that some of the links that I've included here might not work by the time this book comes out. Dan Cohen and Roy Rosenzweig dealt with this by creating a centralized site of cached links for their book, *Digital History*, <http://chnm.gmu.edu/digitalhistory/links/>.
- ²¹ These conversations can benefit all involved, especially if there are collaborative projects involved. Students learn about how historians and archivists use and think about all kinds of sources. Archivists get feedback, use of their collections, and even some help. Teaching faculty get better-informed students and potentially some meaningful projects for their classes. Everyone wins.