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Academic collaboration for experiential learning

Perspectives on using archival collections and information literacy in history education

Abigail P. Dowling designed a second-year lower-division course at Mercer University in Ancient Mediterranean Civilizations for fall 2017 geared towards History and Classics minors and majors. The course was designed to fit into her four-course pre-modern course series, each of which focuses on a different historical skill set. She planned the Ancient Mediterranean course to focus on historical analysis of material culture through active, engaged student activities.

These engaged student activities are affected by kinesthetic learning. Physically holding the objects creates an analytical connection that viewing photos of them would not. Dowling wished for her students to have hands-on experience with period-created objects, so she reached out to faculty at Tarver Library, including Kristen Bailey (Humanities Research Services) and Kathryn Wright (University Archives), to set up library instruction relating to the newly donated Holmes Ancient Objects Collection.

In 2016, Y. Lynn Holmes gifted the Mercer University Library with a collection of Near Eastern and Mediterranean antiquities amounting to nearly 800 pieces and another 200-some objects in 2017. The Holmes Collection was donated expressly for use as a teaching collection. It consists of coins, figurines, oil lamps, beads, tiles, pitchers, and other daily living items consisting of ceramic, metal, glass, and stone. Most of the items are small and stable enough to be reasonably handled by individuals in a classroom setting.

The librarians feel that student use of this Holmes Ancient Objects Collection to interact with history facilitates outstanding information literacy education, especially when it comes to the relationship with the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education, which encourages lifelong learning. More than one frame within the Framework concentrates on the experiential relationship between students, objects, and creation. The faculty involved with this project took the guidelines of "Information Creation as a Process" and "Scholarship as Conversation" to create an assignment that gave students the ability to become the authorities, thus establishing a stronger connection to history as a living process.

The assignment

The course included two progressive projects that involved the student in each step of the historical process for the antiquities from identification to analysis. The first two-part assignment relied heavily on the Tarver Library's Holmes Collection and faculty. Bailey and Wright cotaught two sessions for the project. The first was an instructional session on library resources, primary and secondary sources, how to handle historical objects, and writing thick historical descriptions. The second session was a 75-minute hands-on workshop

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with the Holmes objects to allow the students to investigate their assigned object. The goal of both sessions was to gather sufficient information to write thick descriptions for dissemination to their peers.

The first assignment involved students drafting a thick description of objects. The goal was to describe their object in immense detail with no analysis or interpretation of the object, so that another scholar could use it to make interpretations. They were then assigned an object of their own, for which they drafted and thoroughly edited a short thick description (250 to 350 words).

For the second portion of the assignment, Dowling distributed the anonymized, revised descriptions to different students. With only these thick descriptions, students then researched and drafted short historical analyses of the objects and their originating culture using the library's holdings. For both stages, Dowling distributed simultaneous written and verbal guidelines. For the first assignment, the students were repeatedly encouraged to avoid any interpretation or analysis until the second assignment in the project.

Library instruction

Library instruction concerning the thick description assignment is detailed below.

The first session

The library instruction of the first session was focused on educating students on source types, where they can go to find reliable, peer-reviewed resources in history, and how to appropriately handle ancient objects. The lesson plan for the instruction session was designed around the ACRL Framework standards addressing students' abilities to:

acknowledge they are developing their own authoritative voices in a particular area and recognize the responsibilities this entails, including seeking accuracy and reliability, respecting intellectual property, and participating in communities of practice; assess the fit between an information product's creation process

and a particular information need; develop, in their own creation processes, an understanding that their choices impact the purposes for which the information product will be used and the message it conveys.[1]

At the beginning of the class, the research services librarian verbally assessed the students' understanding of the difference between primary, secondary, and tertiary sources, and found that some, but not the majority, had a basic understanding of primary and secondary, but the students had largely not understood what fell under the heading of tertiary (or fact-finding) sources. Nearly one third of this first session was given over to traditional library instruction on clearly understanding historical sources, how to use library databases (JSTOR and the Discovery Tool), and finding reliable open access resources (Perseus Digital Library) that housed sources on the ancient world. Once the traditional library instruction was completed, students were instructed in handling ancient objects, and then proceeded to an interactive learning activity with Dowling and Bailey on how to create a thick description of three example objects: a grey cylinder with scenes engraved on it, a string of beads, and a modern reproduction of a grey amulet of an Egyptian god, which was included to show how convincing reproductions can be in comparison to ancient objects.

Handling guidelines. In consultation with Emory University's Michael C. Carlos Museum, the Mercer University Archives designed and approved a series of guidelines aimed at students for handling archival objects in a classroom setting. These guidelines were paired with a form that professors can use to request specific objects from the Holmes collection. A summary of the handling guidelines included that only pencils, phones, and paper were allowed in the room with the objects to minimize the risk of theft or damage. To prepare for handling the objects, students were instructed to wear gloves, remove dangling jewelry, and pull back long hair and sleeves. The handling procedures included guidelines on how to properly pass

the objects, how to safely photograph the objects, and to always handle the objects with two hands.

Thick description activity. Once the students had learned to appropriately handle the objects, Dowling and Bailey led groups of students through the creation of an example thick description with the three objects mentioned earlier. The students were strongly encouraged to only physically describe the objects without inferring use, material, creation, or name. Students' attempts to analyze the objects were pointed out, and students were reminded of the intent of the description-only based assignment. While Dowling and Bailey were leading students through the creation of a thick description, Wright monitored the ancient objects for appropriate handling and reminded students of proper protocols. This activity lasted around 45 minutes, and students seemed more comfortable with both the handling of the objects and writing description-only responses post-activity.

A look at one of the archival objects—a Bronze Horse Control Piece (Roman, 200 B.C.E.-400 A.C.E.), used for the second session.

The second session

The items were selected based on stability, durability, and size. They were placed in Volara foam-lined Sterilite plastic baskets that were approximately 5" x 8" x 2". A slip of paper with the object identifier was placed in the corner of the basket, as well. Along with nitrile gloves, the baskets were placed at each station. Each student received an artifact. Upon arrival, students placed their belongings in a separate, secure location. They were encouraged to bring their student identification card, cell phone, pencil, and paper into the classroom. The assignment was explained again by the professor, and students began working. As they worked, the archivist walked around and took photos of each student's workstation with the object, object identifier, and student ID. This assisted in recording the condition of the items at the beginning of the assignment, as well as tracked which student received which item. While these tasks were performed, the research services librarian monitored the students and items. The students were encouraged to take photos as personal prompts and for the final descriptions but were not allowed to hold their phones over the items to prevent dropping of said phones.

Conclusions

Our overall initial impressions are that hands-on use of historical objects accompanied by archival and information literacy instruction was an effective historical learning tool for beginning History and Classics students. The assignment complemented the in-class lecture instruction. From Dowling's instructor perspective, the majority of students' assignments met or exceeded the course's stated Student Learning Objectives: 'Examine material evidence carefully to understand what it intended to communicate and what we can learn from it by situating it in a historical context' and 'Use texts and objects to propose and support arguments concerning various elements of ancient Mediterranean cultures, especially empires.'

In addition, the students demonstrated skill transfer of the critical object analysis in other assignments in the course. For example in a later assignment, most students successfully created an object and analyzed it, demonstrating that they understood the role that material production played in ancient societies, and how to analyze it historically as a scholar. Further, the

The Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR) has been awarded $1.12 million by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation to implement a sustainable, extensible digital library platform and set of curatorial processes to federate records relating to the cultural heritage of the Middle East. CLIR and its Digital Library Federation program will work with technical partners at Stanford University and content providers worldwide to build on the Digital Library of the Middle East (DLME) prototype and create processes to extend the DLME. DLME is envisioned as a nonproprietary,

multilingual library of digital objects providing greater security for, preservation of, and access to digital surrogates of cultural heritage materials. The platform will be portable and reusable for any future digital library project, encouraging a global coherence of access to and preservation of the cultural record. The project team, led by DLME Project Director Peter Herdrich, Curatorial Lead Elizabeth Waraksa, and a data manager/project coordinator based at Stanford Libraries, will draw on best practices from other digital library projects to support cost-effective and reproducible curatorial workflows for identifying, selecting, and federating digital assets that represent both cultural materials under threat and objects housed in libraries and museums beyond conflict zones.

Consumer: News Attitudes and Practices in the Digital Era," Pew Research Center, July 7, 2016, www.journalism.org/2016/07/07/young-adults/.

3. Ibid., ACRL, "Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education."

4. Michael H. K. Bendels, Ruth Müller, Doerthe Brueggmann, and David A. Groneberg, "Gender Disparities in High-Quality Research Revealed by Nature Index Journals," *PLoS One* 13 (2018), https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0189136.

5. Howard Garrison, "Underrepresentation by Race–Ethnicity Across Stages of U.S. Science and Engineering Education," *CBE—Life Sciences Education* 12, no. 3 (2013): 357–63, https://doi.org/10.1187/cbe.12-12-0207.

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students' final projects demonstrated a more developed awareness of the dynamic nature of historical inquiry and the stages of the historical process. Dowling felt that the hands-on learning with the objects fostered better student understanding of how to analyze historical objects and integrate them into their historical analyses as evidence. Based on classroom interactions, the instructor believes the students also found the experience positive, and the assignments challenging yet engaging. Dowling considers the assignment effective and will use the same series of assignments the next time the course is taught with only minor instructional revisions to increase student clarity of the assignment's

expectations. Further, she intends to execute a more evidence-based examination of the effectiveness of the project.

From the library perspective, the artifacts themselves were undamaged by student handling using the developed protocol and so the collection may be used again in the same controlled circumstances for this assignment or similar assignments.

Note

1. ACRL's "Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education," last modified January 11, 2016, www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework.