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Engaging neglected histories

First-year students, archives, and Wikipedia

At the University of California (UC)-Merced, the General Education program recently introduced Spark seminars, a first-year experience that invites incoming undergraduate students into the knowledge-making activity of a research university with a goal of fostering students' intellectual curiosity, feelings of inclusion, and connections to place. To cultivate these dispositions, faculty are encouraged to create contexts for student research using campus and/or community resources. In spring 2020, Catherine Koehler, continuing lecturer in the Merritt Writing Program, approached University Archivist Jerrold Shiroma about the possibility of a pair of instructional sessions that would introduce students to archives and archival research through the UC-Merced Library Special Collections, in particular the library's digital collection of newsletters authored by Japanese Americans incarcerated in temporary detention centers in the Central Valley during World War II.[1] Koehler also wanted students to communicate their research to audiences beyond the classroom, which involved further collaboration with Shiroma to introduce students to Omeka, produce a digital exhibit, and, recently, partnerer with librarian Sara Davidson Squibb to develop a new Wikipedia page for the Merced Assembly Center. This article provides a description of these collaborations and outlines challenges, student learning, and future directions to integrate archival collections and library instructional projects with undergraduate teaching.

Introducing archives

The history of California's Central Valley is often overlooked in discussions of the state. Despite the important and complex histories of the region in areas such as agriculture, the prison industry, labor rights, and immigrant justice, the gravitational pull of the coastal regions dominate California narratives. For example, organizing by the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee and the United Farm Workers in the 1950s onward is typically seen as singular and not part of a wider social and economic narrative of the region. The popular history of the incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II also is largely absent of the significant role the Central Valley played. Of the twelve temporary detention centers (euphemistically named "Assembly Centers") constructed across California, seven were constructed in the Central Valley. Unlike those in Santa Anita and Pomona, both in Greater Los Angeles, none of the centers in the Central Valley have a dedicated Wikipedia entry. All other mentions of the centers are in passing when describing fairground sites or discussing the general history of the city or town.

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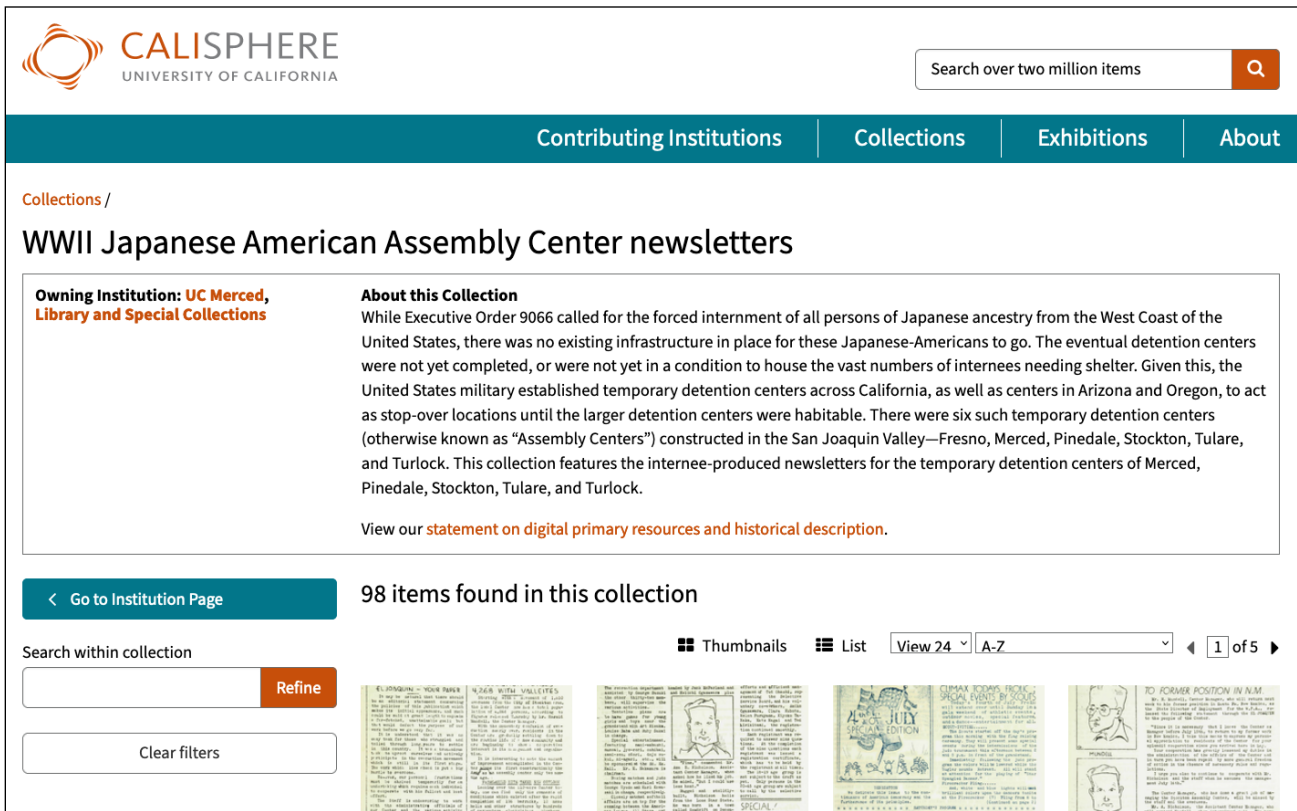
Figure 1: Landing page of WWII Japanese American Assembly Center newsletters at Calisphere.

The UC-Merced Library has made the history of the Central Valley a collecting focus in part to address these absences. Additionally, the library has looked to increase the number of instructional opportunities on archives, archival resources, and the library's own archival collections. The hope is that these opportunities will not only expose students to new research methodologies, but also engage students with unfamiliar histories. These instructional sessions can also provide students with insights into how and why these collections are acquired and the processes involved in their acquisition and arrangement. For Koehler's class, Shiroma designed instructional sessions to provoke interest in archives, and to encourage students to ask questions about archives, how they come to be, what archives include, and, perhaps just as important, what is excluded.

The first session offered a general overview of archives, how archives are physically constructed, and some practical concerns and considerations for working within archives. In addition, students were introduced to some key archival concepts, such as "enduring value," and were asked to think about what this concept might mean when encountering archival collections.

Figure 2: Cover of The Mercedian, a newsletter produced at the Merced Assembly Center.[2]

Students were also introduced to finding aids and their various components, the differences between digital and physical collections, and a brief overview of metadata and its importance in describing digital objects. Finally, students were also encouraged to perform searches using two tools provided by UC's California Digital Library: the Online Archive of California
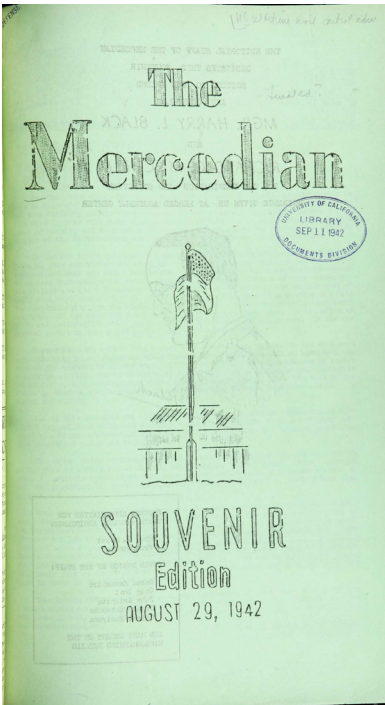
(OAC) and Calisphere. This first session closed with an overview of the various collections housed at the UC-Merced Library.

The second session offered a (hopefully) more imaginative take on thinking through and with archives. Concepts from the first session were recast to encourage a more critical take on archives. Metadata, for example, was shown to not only describe, but also potentially fix an object's meaning. We returned to the concept of "enduring value," and considered it in the context of how archives can further narratives of institutional power and exacerbate erasure within archival collections before discussing how to reimagine and build alternative archives as spaces for empowerment and recovery. Students were presented with the Densho project as an example of a community-driven archival project, which also fit with the students' engagement with the World War II Japanese American Assembly Center Newsletters.

Primary among the key goals of these introductory sessions is to try and empower students to engage critically and creatively with archives and primary sources, and to provide them with tools to recognize their own agency in the knowledge creation process. This is crucial given the demographics of UC-Merced's student body, who may come from historically marginalized populations, and whose stories have been largely absent from archival collections.

Introducing Wikipedia and students' contributions

To extend the concept of students as part of a knowledge-creation process, Koehler initially had students create a digital exhibit about the Merced Assembly Center, hosted on Omeka with support from Shiroma. However, because of the learning curve of both the Omeka platform and the concept of digital exhibits, she was seeking other venues where student work might be made available for public audiences. She pivoted to Wikipedia when our instruction librarians sought out faculty collaborators who wanted to introduce students to information creation and evaluation via Wikipedia, envisioning that students would create a Wikipedia article dedicated to the Merced Assembly Center. This project aligned with librarians' larger goals to increase the diversity of Wikipedia articles and to support knowledge co-created through student contributions.

To prepare students to create this Wikipedia article, UC-Merced librarians created an asynchronous Canvas module to introduce Wikipedia to students—highlighting its policies and pillars, the article classification system, editing basics, and criticisms about a lack of diversity in contributors and content. As part of the module activities, students created their own Wikipedia account to avoid triggering limits on account creation, which occurs when multiple users create account from the same location within a limited timeframe such as a class period.

Next, students met with Davidson Squibb for an in-person session that focused on information-finding for relevant resources on the topic, Wikipedia's policies regarding image use, and basic concepts related to image rights, including copyright, public domain, and Creative Commons (CC) licenses. To check students' understanding of these concepts, she provided students with images from digital repositories and asked them to determine if the rights information on the images allowed for their use in Wikipedia.

Before returning for their final library session, Koehler worked with students to map out and assign sections of the new Wikipedia article based on their observations of existing and related articles. They started drafting their work in a Google document because of potential user conflicts on the Wikipedia editing interface. In this third library interaction

with students, Davidson Squibb reviewed how to make Wikipedia article edits and upload images to the Wikimedia Commons. After this direct instruction, students made contributions to their class Google doc, later transferring their work to the draft Wikipedia article in the Sandbox.

Use primary sources carefully

With the course's archives focus, we expected students to incorporate primary sources into the new Merced Assembly Center Wikipedia article. Yet we were keenly aware of Wikipedia's Core Content policies calling for a neutral point of view, verifiability, and no original research. Wikipedia's policies emphasize using reliable, published sources.[3] While Wikipedia recognizes that primary sources can be appropriate and valuable, it calls for careful use of them. Wikipedia's states that "primary sources may only be used on Wikipedia to make straightforward, descriptive statements that any educated person—with access to the source but without specialist knowledge—will be able to verify are directly supported by the source."[4]

To avoid article deletion, we both encouraged students to use archival materials (in keeping with Wikipedia's policies) and to incorporate published secondary and tertiary sources about the Merced Assembly Center. During this process, we observed students' tendency to reference other Wikipedia articles and varied levels of accurate source summary. We regularly revisited student work to ensure ethical contributions from a variety of sources. We also reflected on Wikipedia's call for editors to refer to archival materials in a neutral way, which often felt incongruous with students' exposure to the value of archives and the internment of Japanese Americans in the Merced Assembly Center.

Know your licenses and tags

Students also wanted to include images along with article text, yet Wikipedia's use of images is more restrictive than we imagined as it does not permit users to upload images using CC licenses with the non-commercial designation. While CC BY-SA, CC BY, and CC0 are permitted, Wikipedia restricts use of noncommercial licenses in anticipation that Wikipedia articles could be used for commercial purposes, for example, use of Wikipedia article in a textbook.[5] Wikipedia's policies considerably narrowed what images students could include in the Merced Assembly Center article.

While students did identify new images for the Wikipedia Commons, there were additional challenges in this uploading process. When adding rights information for items released or designated as public domain by a repository, students had to add a specific copyright tag. Without this tag, Wikipedia will delete uploaded items. For items with this designation, we instructed students to select "Another reason not selected above" at the rights release tab. Then they could apply the copyright tag of {{PD-author | Name of Entity}} and replace "Name of Entity" in the tag with the repository name. Students required some specialized knowledge to both identify allowable images and add the appropriate copyright tag. It proved much easier for students to use images already available in the Wikimedia Commons rather than uploading new ones.

Student reflections on learning

In their final reflections, students identified how this integrated project shifted their

relationship to archives and to Wikipedia, as well as their sense of inclusion in the research activity of the university and as knowledge producers. Most students reported little, if any, prior exposure to archives or archival research. At the end of the semester, students indicated increased awareness of our archival collections as a resource as well as curiosity about these collections and excitement about pursuing additional research opportunities in the archives. Students also described being more familiar with the role and work of an archivist along with its ethical complexities and noted that their assumptions about archival holdings had shifted from simply "old books" to more expansive material and digital artifacts. Students were also able to articulate the values and limitations of various primary source materials and the importance of relating and contextualizing these materials to make meaning from them. As student Vanessa Alvarez reflected, "I never realized how important archives are and how research gives them purpose."
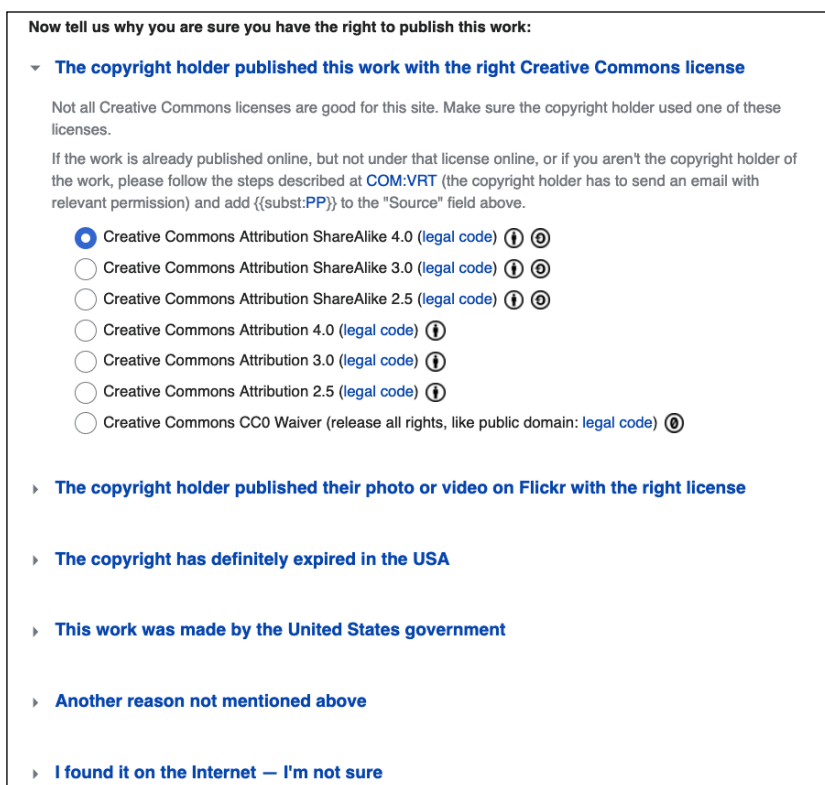

Figure 3: Release rights tab of the Wikimedia Commons Upload Wizard.

Figure 4: Sample copyright tag at the Release rights tab of the Wikimedia Commons Upload Wizard.

Students from the region especially appreciated the focus on Central Valley history, with most confirming that they were unaware of the temporary detention centers and the Central Valley's significance to Japanese American internment. Students also related this local history to inclusion of Asian Americans in social justice curricula. Student Jenny Situ underscored this point, emphasizing that she "appreciated that you are mentioning the Japanese internment camps, especially the one in Merced. I had no idea that there used to be a Japanese internment camp here. A lot of classes, even classes focused on social justice/history, do not talk about the Asian American experience. I really appreciate you putting your time and research into finding these materials." Involving students in bridging information gaps with the public was also meaningful to them, particularly for those with local ties. As student Alexa

Figure 5: Merced Assembly Center Wikipedia article.[6]

Ultreras explained, "I never would have thought in my life that I would have contributed to [Wikipedia], and especially a page of my hometown."

Alexa echoed others who emphasized that they would not have considered themselves capable contributors to Wikipedia. No students reported having edited Wikipedia before, and most indicated either lack of knowledge about how to become a Wikipedian or, more frequently, their own self-perceived lack of authority and expertise to contribute. Through the Wikipedia project, students were able to revise these self-perceptions, and many indicated that they felt motivated and capable of making future edits. Many students moved from a limited view of Wikipedia's usefulness to a deeper understanding of this co-created information source. Students had generally described Wikipedia as inappropriate for academic research and routinely disallowed by their instructors.

Fewer described using Wikipedia to identify secondary source material. When reflecting on the Wikipedia project at the end of the semester, however, students indicated improved understanding of how information is negotiated on Wikipedia through community standards and review, could assess and distinguish between more- and less-developed pages to evaluate information and identify information gaps, felt better equipped to make choices about source suitability within a given rhetorical context, and expressed heightened ethical responsibility to their sources, to one another, and to their audience.

Conclusion

The project had benefits for the instructors as well, and it will inform future instruction through spending more time with students focusing on primary source integration,

reflecting on Wikipedia's core content policies that can impact the inclusion of archival materials, and discussing with students to think about how power flows through the archives and how knowledge is constructed in the archives—by and for whom, and to what purposes. This instructional collaboration offers an example of how archival collections can be integrated with undergraduate teaching to advance inclusion of neglected local histories in the curricula and of underrepresented students in the knowledge-making activity of the university, and to improve representation and participation on Wikipedia. ✐

Notes

1.   "WWII Japanese American Assembly Center Newsletters," Calisphere, accessed July 18, 2022, https://calisphere.org/collections/66/.

2.   Merced Assembly Center, "The Mercedian, Souvenir Edition," August 29, 1942, WWII Japanese American Assembly Center newsletters, https://calisphere.org/item/559e1731-8be4-45df-8f4a-e57a9251b6f4/.

3.   "Core Content Policies," Wikipedia, May 3, 2022, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Wikipedia:Core_content_policies&oldid=1085939107.

4.   "Wikipedia:Identifying and Using Primary Sources," Wikipedia, May 26, 2022, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Wikipedia:Identifying_and_using_primary_sources&oldid=1089964294.

5.   "Contributing Images and Media Files," Wiki Education, accessed June 6, 2022, https://dashboard.wikiedu.org/training/students/images-and-media.

6.   "Merced Assembly Center," Wikipedia, July 27, 2022, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Merced_Assembly_Center&oldid=1100684026.