Interviewer

So, we have a set number of questions. I appreciate that you're no longer running this course now.

Respondent

I can't remember I'm afraid what course I said....

Interviewer

It was the Y (module title) module, which I believe you're not doing now…

Respondent

I was doing it this Semester but it's going to go. It's on its way out. I don't have this year's, but I do have last year's. It hasn't really changed much since last year so this is a syllabus. And I can also share...put you on the Blackboard site of this year so you can look at it all and everything there.

Interviewer

Okay. 'Cos I've had to look online and just quickly printed out your syllabus overview which is really helpful. So thank you for that.

Respondent

Yeah

Interviewer

That's absolutely fine. We don't need to go into too much detail.

Respondent

Okay.

Interviewer

Okay. Let's kick off. So how did you learn how to teach undergraduates with primary sources?

Respondent

I just worked out for myself, I think, to be honest. I, well, in a sense we use primary sources all the time, in the sense that we consider our texts primary sources. In the English department we consider the Penguin Classics Jane Austen a primary source because it is the primary text right that's what our students list in the bibliography. So what we're simply doing is asking students to apply the skills that they would use for textual analysis to other forms of object. So whether that's a picture of a cross in the medieval cross on this module or whether it's a picture of a manuscript page or a digitised manuscript, something like that, what you're actually doing is extending the primary source analysis skills that they already have from the text that we consider primary sources, using a bit more specialist, you know, vocabulary knowledge but we consider it as the working with these primary sources to be an extension of working with text or primary sources.

Interviewer

Okay, because I think we would consider a Penguin version of text not a primary source in this instance. I'll have a quick look. Yes, we're defining primary sources as historical or contemporary human artefacts which are direct witnesses to a period event, personal group or phenomenon, and which are typically used as evidence in humanities and some social sciences. For the purpose of this study in literature, etc. we are excluding the main text, films or artworks being studied in traditional formats. This is because this type of teaching with primary sources is a universal pedagogical method. So a literature course which is, in which students do NOT read literature is virtually inconceivable. However, the pedagogical use of text, films or artworks as WITNESSESS to a historical period, or cultural media including manuscripts and additions being studied as cultural artefacts are in scope.

Respondent

Yeah. So we do some of those in there.

Interviewer

So you do all of that don't you?

Respondent

I think... I have to say that I think that that distinction is probably problematic.

I think that I would have to say that I would have a field day shooting holes in that definition! (laughs) You know, in what sense do we EVER study literature in a way which is not a witness to its contemporary environment. Yeah. I'm fine to go with that and I've got examples in here of a variety of ways in which we use what YOU’RE considering primary sources in this so that's no problem, we can do the interview! (laughs)

Interviewer

Yeah. So basically you made it up yourself (learning to teach with primary sources).

Respondent

I guess some I mean I did primary source work in various other courses before I taught this course so for example a few years ago I did a course called X (name) which ran in various versions where we used the Early English Books Online collection to look at, which is obviously primary source, you know. It was initially produced by Primary Source Media I think before it went round EBBO and to look at as artefacts the collections of travel narratives that we used in the Renaissance. That course doesn't run in that form anymore. But it's similar principles that I'm using in this. I inherited this course from somebody else, but the principles are the same as the ones that I used in my other course teaching before.

Interviewer

Okay. So did you receive any support or instruction from anyone else in learning how to use primary sources?

Respondent

Ah, no, not really. I don't think. I'm just trying to think. Umm I've been to a couple of workshops at Medieval conferences on incorporating digital resources into your teaching, that kind of thing.

Interviewer

Okay. And did you use any of those ideas that you've received from others?

Respondent

I can't say that I consciously remember across applying anything but I'm sure that they turned out to be relevant in a wider in a wider sense.

Interviewer

Sure. Do you make any of your own ideas or collections of sources, or other instructional resources available to others?

Respondent

Do you mean outside the university?

Interviewer

No I mean within the university. In, yeah within or outside.

Respondent

So, this handbook involves assembling collections of primary sources to make it easy for students to discuss them in class. So for example, speaking of texts as witnesses to the era they were produced in, this is a selection of texts that were produced out of Old English texts that were produced not in the Anglo Saxon period, you know, which would be going up to 1066 but actually that were printed in the 16th or 17th century. And they've been pulled out of EBBO, Early English Books Online, presented in this handbook form for the students to use. And there are a couple of other examples that have been collated and pulled together on the internet, because obviously EBBO is really too difficult for first year undergraduates to use in an unmediated way. So you use it by pulling the resources out and make and producing a PACK of some sort that students can ???? with questions to help them look at them.

Interviewer

Okay. So can you tell me a little bit about the course and its pedagogical aims, why you developed it and how it has evolved? You said you've inherited it though didn't you?

Respondent

Yeah yeah but I can certainly tell you why it's... I can tell you why it was developed and how it's had to evolve, definitely. So it was developed in order to, as this kind of I think is conveyed quite well in the course description to think about umm to introduce students to Old English text but very firmly within the context of the wider cultural and social environment in which they were produced, read and understood. So that means looking at text, but also then looking at images of artefacts that were produced around about the same time by the same sorts of people that produced and read the text. They're thinking about interconnections between them. So the idea is to put literature firmly in its cultural context and the cultural context of cultural production and reception. And then, so in week one, we consider the parts of the Old English poem Bear Wolf and what it says about material cultural and material culture of warfare, swords, shields, gold rings and so on, alongside Sutton Hoo ship burial, and the Staffordshire Hoard. So you can look at the kinds of things that people were thinking about as they composed and listened to these poems. But it was also about the reception of Old English text a little bit throughout time. So, another thing that we look at, the bits that I've just shown you, is how then the same texts were received much later on, both in the Elizabethan period which is a very important time for the development of Old English in the present. So, you look at, we look a little bit at the creation of websites that present Old English primary texts, primary source texts so manuscripts in this instance, but also EDITED versions of those texts, kind of, again, and that's really as witnesses to their environment, what are these texts telling us about editorial practices and about our attitudes to the study of Old English. And likewise, many of those texts also contain images of and discussion of artefacts so they are a way of accessing the other forms of primary material evidence about the time as well. So that's kind of the aim is to bring these things together and think about not just the text but the MEDIUM through which the text reaches us and how that impacts upon its meaning.

Interviewer

Yeah, brilliant, thank you. So I think you've just answered this question, which is explain HOW you incorporate primary sources in this course. So WHY did you decide to incorporate primary sources in this way?

Respondent

Well, I mean it's the module aim. So it's all sort of that that??? So the module aim, which is kind of related to programme aims really which are to understand literature within its environment. Therefore, you need a RANGE of witnesses to that environment.

Interviewer

Absolutely. So what challenges do you face in incorporating primary sources in this course?

Respondent

So this is my biggest bug bear, which you know from me ranting in an email, is the biggest challenge is that they disappear. The digital resources are unstable. And this relates to a question you asked previously but I don't think I did actually end up fully answering. How you MODIFY, how you have to modify a course as you go along. So, the problem is that this course has only been running since 2014, so it's not a very long lifespan for a course. A number of the digital resources that we relied upon when it was first produced have just disappeared. And some of them, you know that there's this fantastic article about the bit now about the visionary cross website, visionary cross website was one we used to use to teach text, called the Dream of Rood. And there's this wonderful article telling you what this website would look like and do if it existed, but you go to the website address, and it's no longer there. And that's not that's the probably most serious example in ?? but it's not the only example. So every year, out of your non-existent preparation time, you have to go through this before you can send this handbook to the press and check that every single link is still there. And if they're not, you have to work out what to do if that link was essential to your teaching. (Gets up to shut window) There seem to be two options boiling and freezing. And that's really, really time consuming. And also quite stressful and difficult because the other thing that happens is you do that in August and you send your handbook to the press and something disappears in October. So, and that's happened as well that's happened not just on this module, but on other modules. The instability of the digital resources for teaching these is sending us back to photocopies it really is sending us back because it's just too stressful and difficult to rely on them for teaching purposes. And what I ended up having to do this year so many resources have disappeared this year, so I ended up rewriting on the fly the end of the module, and the end of the module used to be about how we were moving into a kind of a digital future where we have wider access to these kinds of materials and so on. And I rewrote it this year to say, that's what it looked like five years ago now we've got what we've got is the shrinking web and lots of these resources have disappeared and brought in instead. As well as, as a counterbalance to this, the real troubling situation with this particular set of materials is actually the people who are bothering to make websites better are often far right extremists! So you've got a kind of a nightmare scenario where the funding for scholarly websites and for access is being removed and people who want to spend time and funding on this, do not have very pleasant motives at all. And so the end of the module had to be completely rewritten about that around that this year.

Interviewer

That's a major challenge.

Respondent

A major challenge. Yeah.

Interviewer

Wow. So, you talked about how you incorporate your primary sources. Do you incorporate primary sources in all of your courses in a similar way?

Respondent

No, to a lesser extent depends on the module aims. And, this one was very specifically focused around material culture. So, some of them, I, and it depends on the size of the modules as well. If you have a larger module, then you will have more time to explore the complexities of a primary... of examining a primary source. So, on a kind of what we call a double, a 30 credit module, on a 15 credit module there's less time so this is 15 credits, but some of my other 15 credit modules I use them a bit less at the moment, on undergraduate ones. And I also I feel a little bit like I was burnt by this one and I'm careful about what I include now. .

Interviewer

Absolutely. Yeah. Does anyone else on this course provide instruction? Do you have any...?

Respondent

Yes.

Interviewer

Yes?

Respondent

Yeah.

Interviewer

Oh, who?

Respondent

Who? Co-instructors?

Interviewer

Or rather, you know, what's their role?

Respondent

Well, sometimes they'll give guest lectures. I gave most of the lectures on this one. I had a couple of people leading seminars and giving guest lectures, but they do so using exactly the same course pack with common course pack used everywhere so they wouldn't be using different primary sources, I don't think, not generally.

Interviewer

Okay. So how does their instruction relate to the rest of the course then?

Respondent

So we do lectures and seminars and this (shows handbook) and what you do in each one, what the students do in each one is set out in this handbook, what staff and students do in each of these. So, a lecture on a topic, and then seminar examining some normally some particular sources in specific details detail.

Interviewer

So, how do you communicate with them about how they're going to do their instruction?

Respondent

Just a meeting at the beginning of the module and occasional emails.

Interviewer

Yeah, okay, thank you. So moving on to finding primary sources. How do YOU find the primary sources that you use in this course?

Respondent

Umm, well this one obviously was handed over to me from somebody else but other things you just I just go Google, and also being on Medieval Twitter, people announce new sources and then you kind of bookmark them or put them in your folder. So through networks through conferences, announcements at medieval conferences and kind of introducing new, you know, new teaching materials that there's... I go, I tend to go to the big international Medieval Congress in Leeds most years, and there are always some pedagogical workshops introducing new materials or new platforms and that sort of thing.

Interviewer

Excellent. So do you keep a collection of digital or physical sources that you use for teaching?

Respondent

Just a folder, just some folders on... that might only... computer folders really.

Interviewer

Digital folders. Okay, Yep. So what challenges do you face in finding appropriate sources?

Respondent

That's not d...To be honest, that's not particularly difficult. I don't find that, particularly difficult, I mean the networks are really good SHARING information and so on for medieval pedagogy, it's not particularly hard to find things

Interviewer

Okay

Respondent

That's fine. And you've got brilliant connections like the British Library and Gallica, the Bibliotec National with loads of great manuscripts fully digitised so if you want to find a manuscript to demonstrate something it's not particularly difficult to do. You can go into Gallica British Library download a nice image to discuss with your students and so on.

Interviewer

Is that Gallica?

Respondent

Gallica, yeah. It's the Bibliotec National’s online repository.

Interviewer

Okay. Lovely. Thank you. So how do your students find and access primary sources?

Respondent

That's mediated through us because I think these things are easy for us to find, I think they are very difficult for students to find. So, we will put links up on Blackboard or collate collections, like this (shows documents) for them to use

Interviewer

Sure. So do you... once they have...I think you've answered that. It's basically, you're basically directing them you're either giving them the stuff or you're giving them the links.

Respondent

Yeah

Interviewer

And so it's fairly straightforward really.

Respondent

Yeah. I mean it would only be the context of a dissertation. So something like that. A research-led module, which is a different sort of module, that I would tell students to go away just look and explore on a particular range of websites to look for their own primary source materials if it was appropriate to their dissertation, as it often is actually. Lots of them more to do book history dissertations which involves kind of looking at the physical makeup of a book. And in that sense, you're thinking of a book as being a primary source.

Interviewer

Yeah

Respondent

And in that respect I'll tell students to go away and investigate something like the Internet Archive, text archive for old editions of books.

Interviewer

Okay. How do the ways in which you teach with primary sources relate to the goals of student learning in your discipline?

Respondent

That... Well it's really focused on understanding the way literature functions in its cultural and social contexts which are part of our programme aims. Thinking not just about kind of textual analysis for its own sake but obviously thinking about what literature does in the world. That's how one of our members of staff puts it in open days. You're thinking about what literature does in the world and in order to do that you have to look at other evidence about that world. So you might have to look at more history. Some of our students don't particularly like reading the amount of history sometimes you want them to read or be aware of! And it's also about understanding literature's relationship with visual culture in particular, where there's a strong relationship I think between literature and visual culture.

Interviewer

Okay. When you say visual culture what do you...?

Respondent

Anything from the period. So it might be from the past, it might be you know paintings, sculpture and so on. But now that would include films and television I think as well.

Interviewer

Okay. Do you teach your students what a primary source is and if so how?

Respondent

Umm we try to! (laughs) Well, yeah, I mean yes but just by kind of presenting with them representing it with them and kind of telling them what it is. But I think that they... I think it's a good question actually because they find it confusing in the way that the, there's a, I think a confusion in that in that they don't necessarily think of their texts in books as being primary sources although we think of them in that way. So we do try to explain the distinction to them. Normally, though, I would do that normally in our Learning Support hours which are attached to the modules, kind of troubleshooting and explaining, kind of study skills and so on.

Interviewer

Okay, thank you. To what extent is it important to you that your students develop information literacy or civic engagement through working with primary sources?

Respondent

Information literacy, definitely, I think it's really, really important that students understand things like... They need to understand who's hosting a website. How that website has been funded. And if it disappears, why; why it is it might disappear. And you know what might be the purposes behind such a collection if they're looking at collection of material. So yeah I think it's really important, information literacy. It's one of the things that's really difficult to teach.

Interviewer

Absolutely. And civic engagement?

Respondent

I don't really know what you mean by that.

Interviewer

I suppose like outreach or going to...

Respondent

Yeah, I don't view that as part of...I view that as quite a separate thing to teaching through and about primary sources, I think that that's looks like it's kind of belongs somewhere else.

Interviewer

Sure. Yeah, okay. In what formats do your students engage with primary sources? You mentioned...

Respondent

So digital resources on websites, and through photocopies handed out in class or in handbook like this (shows handbook). Oh I have brought in, that's not true, I've brought in some objects in the past as well. So I don't have it here, it's at home, but Mallory's... I've got a folio edition society reproduction of the Aubrey Beardsley illustrated more?? dafa?? by Thomas Mallory that I use in my module X to hand around to give them an impression of how the Arthurian legend was mediated through these 19th century editions of medieval texts. And that's really good because it's PHYSICAL copies they get in the same size and so they get the sense of how it would have felt to open this thing in the period. I also used to teach a module, a curriculum innovation module on maps and mapping. I used to have, until some builders here broke it, a fantastic Inuit map of Iceland, I think it was, yeah, no Greenland map of Greenland, which is amazing because it's like a reproduction of a map which was carved out of twigs. But somebody came and moved a desk in my office and broke it. That hasn't yet been fixed. And sometimes I'll take in these maps like these (shows maps) which are obviously reproduction primary sources to explain how people thought about medieval world. So I'll bring in physical copies if I can, and I've got loads of books of maps like that big, massive big pile down there! (points to maps) They don't fit anywhere on the bookshelves. That I'll take in to kind of demonstrate how people think about medieval world more clearly.

Interviewer

Wow. Okay, so do your students visit Special Collections or archives or museums?

Respondent

Not for this module.

Interviewer

Okay.

Respondent

I used to send the MA students, that's more common. So they'll go to... the MA students I used to send to Salisbury Cathedral library or take to Salisbury Cathedral library and archives and we had an arrangement with them. And I've also used special manuscripts at Special, and early printed books at Special Collections here. Some others tutors in this department take the students to Chawton House library.

Interviewer

Yeah, okay. So you don't take them to Special Collections now though, or Archives?

Respondent

Not with this...There's no appropriate materials there for this.

Interviewer

Okay. Do your students use any digital tools to examine or interact or present the sources?

Respondent

Er only if we ask them to do presentations, they might use PowerPoint for that. But that's not really a thing on this module.

Interviewer

No okay. They don't use 3D images or...?

Okay. To what extent are the other formats...No that's not relevant. To what extent to these formats and you mentioned the digital websites etc and also the photocopies etc. are these tools pedagogically important to?

Respondent

No. Well, so they're pedagogically they're fantastic, but we, you have to reduce the importance of them to your teaching because they're not stable. So, they should be very important. Again, a couple of years ago it's not THIS module, but I used in a postgraduate module, I built it around a fantastic resource, which was medieval handwriting. Medieval and renaissance handwriting. And they, those were initially websites (but) they got moved I think in a disastrous manoeuvre into apps. And then, but then you have to keep them up to date with the latest app, and that just wasn't being done it wasn't being supported so they've now...I've just about managed to get it through the final presentation of that module. And now if I taught that again I'd have to entirely remove that digital teaching from the module, even though it's the most successful part of the module because what it used to do was give students instant feedback. So they do a transcription and they could press 'check' and immediately check what they got wrong, self-correct and apply that to the next line. It's the MOST, it's the holy grail of learning.

Interviewer

Wow.

Respondent

It really is absolutely instant feedback, correction and an improvement. And, but I would have to remove it entirely from my teaching because it's not reliable and, you know, it hasn't been kept up to date. It might be that somebody updates it to the latest version of Android quite soon but then Android will move on and then what will happen? There needs to be some level of stability to these resources if we're to allow them to take an important place in our learning and teaching.

Interviewer

So, that's a major challenge that for you...

Respondent

It's a huge challenge.

Interviewer

Okay. How do you reference or cite primary sources?

Respondent

It depends on the source, I mean that's a very broad question really. Where would it... wherever it's coming from. So I'd normally umm, you know, so HERE what we've done, this is a good example, Early English Books Online, is the ultimate source and we give details of Early English Books Online here, but we give the full details of the primary source that is being referenced. And that's what I would normally try to do if you're looking through the kind of digital layer. I'd want to give, you know, if it was an object in a museum, details of the museum that it can be found in but also a link to where it can be found online as well.

Interviewer

Great, thank you. What advice would you give to colleagues who are new to teaching with primary sources?

Respondent

Don't lock yourself into teaching, they have to be optional, because if you're losing digital ones they're unstable. Otherwise, your own copies of everything that you can ensure that will be available for you to actually use with your students. Yeah.

Interviewer

Okay. And looking towards the future, what challenges or opportunities will people encounter in teaching undergraduates and (with) primary sources?

Respondent

Umm, I think that the changing nature of the BOOK is really is an interesting one. I think that some of our, we have assumptions about what our students understand by a book and text, and they're being challenged by the new way in which books and texts circulate. So, our understanding of primary sources and what they are and how students are accessing those is going to have to change. And I just, and I think the, in terms of opportunity and challenge, I think that there is a NEED for something, some kind of educational collaboration to keep important digital resources for teaching available and sustainable. Because just relying on individual institutions to host things just has, it hasn't worked so far. They'll fund something for maybe five years and then stop funding it and stuff disappears, and that doesn't happen with books in the library!

Interviewer

Yeah, yeah, yeah. You hope! (both laugh)

Respondent

E-books it happens to, again, which is a complete nightmare.

Interviewer

Yes, yes, depending on the subscriptions and what have you.

Respondent

Yeah, horrendous.

Interviewer

Really. That's very interesting.

Respondent

Yeah. Put them on your reading list, and they're there and then one year they've disappeared and no one's told you that they've gone. What am I supposed to do? Check every single book on a 20 page reading list to check that it's still subscribed? I can't do that. There's no... absolutely unsafe (and) unsustainable.

Interviewer

That's really interesting.

Respondent

Yeah.

Interviewer

Okay. Thank you.

Transcribed by https://otter.ai