Interviewer

First question is: how did you learn how to use primary sources in your undergraduate teaching?

Respondent

How did I learn how to use it in my teaching? Oh yeah, I guess because I use them in my research, but I found out for myself, basically. I think as a PGR (Post Graduate Researcher) I undertook some training but most of it was self-taught. And then I came to the point where I realised that the things I would like my students to know is better-served by online resources and by printing sources. So I wanted to pass on the knowledge that I had gained as a researcher.

Interviewer

And when you say online sources do you mean primary sources?

Respondent

Yeah, so digitised materials I mostly use.

Interviewer

Okay. So did you receive any instruction at all/not really?

Respondent

Myself? No, trial and error.

Interviewer

So do you use any ideas or collections of sources that you, or instructional resources, that you receive from others at all?

Respondent

Every year, when I teach online resources, I do it as you know I think, I do an IT (Information Technology) workshop, in week three of semester one for my third years. And every year I update the online resources for a 19th century research document that I give them, to facilitate that class. So I'm constantly on the lookout. I get alerts from Adam Matthews Digital, from various people, from ProQuest. So I do get alerts from various groups and members about new things that are coming on stream. You know, things that our library might want get, buy a subscription to, and that kind of thing. Quite often I'm making recommendations for trials of things like Adam Matthew Digital projects. And then, if we happen to be in the middle of a trial, when it's free and the students can utilise that, then that will go on my sheet to help them. So that's right, so yes, the answer is I'm always looking out for new sources.

Interviewer

Okay. And do you make your own ideas and sources available to others?

Respondent

I have done. So funded projects that I've done, on limited access, but they're hosted at the University so anyone at the University can get access to the project that I was doing. And that's all about...

Interviewer

Where do you host them?

Respondent

Library.

Interviewer

Okay. Let's talk about module design. So I think the particular course… I think you mentioned one. So, why did you develop it? How has it evolved over time? What are your pedagogical aims?

Respondent

Yeah. This was called A (course name), and it deliberately uses texts that are not in print, for the most part. So it's really dependent on Google Books on... can't remember what it's called now. Oh, can't remember what it is called. Anyway. Whatever... Why is my brain up...

Interviewer

Is it the BL (British Library)?

Respondent

The BL (British Library) 19th century database has a lot, but that’s newspapers. So there's another one where they can get free access to books, and I can't remember what it's called. No, never mind, you'll know the one I mean. So I deliberately wanted to construct a course that gives them the other side of Victorian literary life, that they couldn't normally get in any other university context, they're certainly not getting taught elsewhere. From the beginning it needed online resources, a lot. At the beginning I tended to mix it up with printed copies because students quite like printed copies. Surprising enough. I expected... how's it evolved? This is in answer to the question "how has it evolved?" ...I expected students would be very happy with e-readers, being able to download books on e-readers. Not a bit of it. Always there was a contingent, a quarter of them who liked hardcopy and felt a bit disgruntled about reading digitised copies. And that's increased over time, I would say, rather than decrease, which is very interesting, given the quality of e-readers is improved. Now they like their hardcopies. So now the course is about one third, out-of-print, digital-only access, and the other two thirds is hardcopy, stuff that's sometimes print on demand, but sometimes reissued in scholarly additions.

Interviewer

Have they said why they like hardcopies?

Respondent

They like to write on them. Yes. And I think that level of interaction, that you're scribbling in a lecture or you're scribbling in a seminar, has never gone away. In all the years I've been teaching, and the digital age, has not changed that, which is very interesting. Nonetheless, what is key to this course and what is what they always say at the end of it, they've enjoyed the most, is the digital part. Not necessarily having to buy digital books, but being taught how to use digital resources. So, we used to just give them an, we used to give them in the first iterations, in sort of 2011/12 - so it has been running for almost 10 years now - we used to give them just a little guide to using resources, and then they said "Oh gosh we came unstuck using these resources. We didn't know how to search", and each database has its own kind of quirks. So we decided as a team to, of course even though I'm the convenor, we decided that, giving a proper IT (Information Technology) workshop and talking through some of the quirks of the key databases that they would need for their assignments, would to solve that problem. And then they started asking for not one hour but two. So it's just gone..., they want more and more and more, and they all say we wished we'd had it in the first year, instead of waiting to our third. And a very large number of them go on to use those databases in their dissertations and semester two, so it's key training for them. And I must admit, I have more MA students and PhDs than I can handle and lots of them have come out of this course, because they get their eyes opened to thinking about evidence in different ways, simply because suddenly there's this stuff at their fingertips that they didn't have to find on their own. So from my point of view, I love using these resources and I teach them (students) to think about them (resources) critically so they're not just blindly going, "Oh look that's there. Therefore, it means this." So they're encouraged to be kind of sceptical about what's out there, and to use an independent eye on the person who put information in there. We are all at the mercy of programmers, basically, and data enterers. So yeah. So that's how it's evolved.

Interviewer

Can you explain how you incorporate primary resources into this, into this course?

Respondent

I used to, again going back to your "how has it evolved?" kind of question, I used to have the second assignment as a research report, sorry no, the first assignment was a research report on databases for 19th century research. They all panic like mad about it and then when they got into it, they found it very interesting but most of them had never written a report before. So then I changed that assignment and they got to write a normal essay if they wanted to, or they could write a research report. Still a core of them do want to do that because they find it so intriguing once they get in there. It's like gaming for them. I mean, I think there's a real correlation between their understanding of visual knowledge and the narrative that's unfolding and using those databases. So we kept that question. But now most of them, once they've been shown in week three, so we do it quite early, once they've been shown those resources, end up using them on their essays, even if they using more conventional methods of literary analysis. For instance. They all use JSTOR, and these other resources but I specifically say to them that that doesn't count as a primary resource for the purposes of the assignments. Most of them understand by the end of the module how to bring them together so that's my hope, that's my aim of the module.

Interviewer

So why did you decide to incorporate primary sources in this way?

Respondent

In this particular way? I guess because for most English (academic discipline) students thinking about non-canonical texts and trying to understand what was best, best selling, what was popular what was... Yeah, what was outside the kind of mainstream of university curricula, requires a bit of extra context and so I think I wanted them to understand how to go find the context for themselves. And I think they do. They quite like that journey. They seem to really like it, it gets very good scores at the end of every year.

Interviewer

So what challenges do you face when incorporating primary resources into your course?

Respondent

One of the biggest complaints I get is that they are limited, not by their own imaginations or their own skills, because they just take it off and run with it, most of them, but by what we have access to through the library. So, we have got 19th century newspapers and we've got 19th century periodicals, but if you want certain newspapers, if you want the up to date version, which is being added to every day, you have to pay personal subscription. They find that a challenge and a frustration. And that's one of the, "Please give us another better subscription", is one of the pieces of feedback we get most often, which I can't do anything about because it's the way that British Library sets it up. You know, so I do… I point them to Chronicling America instead where they can use American newspapers for free. But some people do pay the extra because they get so into reading 19th century newspapers, and then also I point them, those who can't do that, you know, who don't want to do that, I point them to the other free ones. We've got access to a lot through our library, so you know, we're not short of things to show them. And because I was responsible for a project called the B (project name), until about, well I'm still on the management board. I use that one as well and that's just free, open access to everyone. So I tend to use things like that as well.

Interviewer

Any other challenges or...

Respondent

No, not now. The main challenge initially, when I made everybody do this research report on digital resources, was it panicked them and they’re third-years and they're feeling stressed enough. But now no. That challenge's kind of gone away. But yeah, I think that the main challenges is just that one.

Interviewer

Do you incorporate primary resources in all of your courses in a similar way?

Respondent

I certainly make some obvious to students but this is the, currently the only third...no wait a minute. No, I have made the second year module a third year. Yeah, I teach another module called C (course name) which is team-taught with colleagues from in, you know, a lot from every period of the department, so it can start with mediaeval and go up to 21st century, hence who's free (to teach). But it always has a core of 19th century as well. And that also uses online resources. It's now also a third-year module, but it has been a second-year module sometimes. But it, it's not embedded in quite the same way, as this is the only place you can find what this course needs in order for you to pass it and do well. C (course name) has much more breadth, and it's not conventional in its methods.

Interviewer

So you mentioned, I think, that you're the convenor of the course, is anyone else… So who else is involved?

Respondent

Yeah, it's, it's gone from a team of five to a team of two, but it's been written as, as was the second year of C (course name)module, to be thematic and so open to whoever's free to teach it. So colleagues from history have sometimes come on and taught some of it too. Because it's, we think of texts not necessarily just as literary texts, but also as cultural events. So we do the rise of the popular press, which of course requires online resources. We also do the Great Exhibition, which requires the online resources available for that. So, yeah, it's a very open course and it means it depends who's available, based on their workloads but I'm always a key...I always teach it.

Interviewer

And they use primary sources as well when they're doing this?

Respondent

Yeah.

Interviewer

Okay. And those are other lecturers basically or...?

Respondent

Yes, yes. Not all of them do because some of the texts, we cover are...they're printed, and they've got, you know, sort of a more traditional approach. But some people introduce new texts that are less easily available and they will use online resources.

Interviewer

How do you communicate with them about what they teach within that course or with other co-people?

Respondent

We...once we've determined who's free and who wants to teach on it. We have a team meeting. And I always have the week three IT (Information Technology) workshop, that's absolutely key and I teach the same texts myself. But outside of that people are free to suggest texts that they think are interesting and roll with it, the theme of the bestseller. So it changes, the curriculum changes a little bit every year.

Interviewer

Moving on to finding primery sources. In your undergraduate teaching in general, how do you find the primary sources to use in your courses?

Respondent

How do I become a customer? I think, sort of, based on my answer to your first question really. I have a list of useful online sources, which I developed, that students use and I use myself. And I add to it and update it. And every year I check all the links to make sure they're still working.

Interviewer

Yeah, and explore what's out there and keep up-to-date with what's going on?

Respondent

Yeah, mostly people in in my Victorian networks, you know, will send me things and go: “Look my new project’s come live.”, and so I can embed that as a new kind of results...Twitter. People are very good at sending me stuff through Twitter.

Interviewer

Do you keep a collection of digital and physical resources that you use in your teaching? Do you have like a specific folder or box or...?

Respondent

I do. I have in some of my learning support hours, which is an additional contact hour that our modules have in English (department). I often take some of my own collection in, so they're physical hardcopies of books and then I encourage the students to get out their laptops and start looking up ways in which they might understand what that physical text means or meant. So we put the material with, with the digital together and those kinds of classes… and other than everything on Blackboard… I store everything on Blackboard. Is that an answer to your question?

Interviewer

Yeah, and physical?

Respondent

Yes, yes, because I'm a book historian. So I have vast numbers of all books and I do use them quite a lot in my teaching. The students, they don't often know what to make of something that looks so different from the way they think of "the book".

Interviewer

And the next question is: "What challenges do you face finding appropriate sources to use?" But you've already mentioned that, that the people, tweet you...

Respondent

Yeah, people definitely let me know. Yeah. So finding them isn't an issue. But I can imagine a time when actually, it would be nice not to have to constantly rely on friends and networks and actually have a repository, a growing repository of useful resources on the library's website that are global. That would be marvellous.

Interviewer

Open access or if you have a University login.

Respondent

Exactly. And it might be nice if they were arranged in a way that meant that I didn't just send students the link, but I could sort them in some way by priority, and they could be, you know, properly targeted towards that period of history that I'm trying to teach. That's difficult.

Interviewer

How do your students find and access the primary sources?

Respondent

I tell them to use the library search engine actually, so we go to “A to Z list of resources”. That's how I get them in. And that's the first thing I tell them. I have a little worksheet, that I think I sent you, about what to do first, how to log in, how to search for stuff. So, which works terrifically well so please don't take that away. I'd be lost without it.

Interviewer

Good to know. Do you specify sources which students must use or do you expected them to locate them, and select sources themselves?

Respondent

It's a very good question. I actually expect them to start with the examples I've shown them. But if they're going to have, to write an assessed piece on digital resources, they must look outside of the list I've given them. That's part of the criteria. The marking criteria is how original, how much original research have they done? How analytical have they been? How curious have they been? So if someone just stopped to my kind of list, they wouldn't get a very good, they'd pass probably, but they wouldn't get a very good mark if they did a reasonable job of looking at the results that I gave them. But in order to do really well they would need to go outside the list. So yeah, I encourage them to explore.

Interviewer

Do you face any challenges relating to the students abilities to access the sources?

Respondent

So, the most common question I get about access is students don't know they have to get in through VPN (Virtual Private Network), when they're off campus, but that's an easy fix. So, yeah. No, I wouldn't say that access has really been a problem.

Interviewer

Do they have any… do they face any challenges for the ones who are exploring outside your list? Are there any challenges that they have in finding the primary sources or...

Respondent

There's no shortage of sources. The challenge is in, when they're new to it then they're anxious, quite rightly, about how valid, how scholarly, the sources are and Wikipedia is a no no, of course, because it's not edited. It's not edited, I mean it *is* but it's edited by just about anybody, as you know. So they do, they're very good at checking with me, "Is this a scholarly source". So they... Yeah, they know they're flying without a safety net. But they can always check with me.

Interviewer

Okay, so how do the ways in which you teach primary sources relate to the goals for the students learning?

Respondent

Each module has a learning… a set of learning outcomes, as you know, and one of the learning outcomes from the beginning for this module has been to help prepare them for the dissertation, which is what I said. They will have access to ways of researching which they have not gotten any other form throughout their university career so that's the main outcome of the module. But they also, I keep telling them if they do elect to write a research report, this is one of the most employable pieces of, like you know CV-able pieces of work in terms of employability that they will do, because they're far more likely to be asked to write a report in a job than they are an essay. So, yeah, that's also… that's probably an unspoken, unwritten outcome, but it is one that I pushed to them as a useful, transferable skill.

Interviewer

Do you teach students how to, or what a primary source actually is?

Respondent

Yes, I do. And they… they sometimes get confused about what the difference is. So, I've even had some, very occasionally this happens, they get it very badly wrong. So they think just because JSTOR is an online source, that counts. And they'll do their report on JSTOR but I, you know, if they read the instructions fully they would realise I say "JSTOR is not a primary source. JSTOR is full of secondary sources and it's simply a way of searching them. A primary source database is a different thing. And here are the examples." So I do explain to them because I yeah, I have had that issue in the past. Most of them get it and know, they know that because we use that language anyway. “A primary source is the novel you're working on. A secondary source is a criticism about that novel.” So they know what a primary source is. Yeah, and you simply have to extend that understanding of primary sources to say "It's anything like a newspaper that was published around the same time as the novel you're working on, that too is a primary source. Anything that's evidence, really."

Interviewer

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

Respondent

I think information literacy is absolutely key and it's one of the skills I see developing most quickly. They are shocked by how dense and lengthy 19th century newspapers are because their information and news comes in very different chunks. I talked them through the difference between a newspaper and 1800, and a tabloid in 1900. That's one of the weeks that we do. "Where do you think the text comes from? Where do you think the word tabloid comes from?" So we talked about that. They understand their own information literacy, historically, by the end of this module. So that's one of our big goals. Yeah. Sorry, what was the other part of the question?

Interviewer

And for civic engagement?

Respondent

Civic engagement. Yeah, they...there is an element of civic engagement in lots of the primary sources that they use because we get in… one of the examples I give them is a newspaper, a scandalous newspaper article, series of articles, that ended up leading to a change in the law for the age of consent for girls in the 1880s. So, they start to see the power of looking into how information, such as newspapers, that they can access digitally, has been used in the past to make change make a real difference. So in that sense, their civic pride is historical that I would think that they can see, you know, what the connections might be to their own sense now.

Interviewer

So what formats do students engage with primary sources. Basically it's online?

Respondent

Yeah, apart from printed books. Yeah. They look at printed books.

Interviewer

Do your students visit any special collections or archives or museums?

Respondent

They do, yes. Yes I take second years on the C (course name)module to Special Collections also my MAs go every year to Special Collections. We run a workshop with D (staff name) of course, but also E (staff name), because I like them to use the Cope Collection and think about local history as well. And D (staff name) always gets out a lovely array of different things from playbills to a copy of Blast, you know, Wyndham Lewis's magazine, and so they can see... start giving them some hands-on experience of how you handle primary materials, how you ask for it, how you use a catalogue, and how you quickly find out from the catalogue entry whether it might be useful to your particular piece of research. So that's... its basic archival skills that they get from them.

Interviewer

So, does D (staff name), do the sort of handling side?

Respondent

She does. She sets it all out for us. Yeah, she gives them a little spiel about each piece, or she and E (staff name) between them, usually. And then I have a worksheet and they have to pick a piece and they have to, in pairs, they have to talk about it and then describe it to the rest of the group for five minutes. Just: "What is it? Why might it be significant? What can it tell us about? How can you tell that story?" Yeah, that's how they do...

Interviewer

Do your students use any digital tools to expand or interact or present their sources? E.g. 3D images or a collaborative annotation platform.

Respondent

No, they don't. No.

Interviewer

Okay, what advice would you give to a colleague who is new to teaching with primary sources?

Respondent

Online, or?

Interviewer

Any. Or you original books.

Respondent

I think a colleague in English (department), it's different in each discipline...for me, based in English (department) but I'm a book historian, for me I'm always surprised by how little history the students know so I always feel that they need context. And that a material object from a particular period requires online resources to help them learn about it, and or, or the library of course, because we've got lots of help there in Special Collections. So yeah, I would say that, you know, colleagues need to take nothing for granted about students’ prior knowledge really. I think, I think we're all, I don't think colleagues would be surprised by that. Most of us know that.

Interviewer

So looking to the future, what challenges or opportunities will people encounter in teaching undergraduates with primary sources, do you think?

Respondent

Gosh, I think there are two. There's certainly two in my area. One is that there was a cull from the library a few years ago, of material that I used all the time, which was on open access shelving and suddenly the following year was gone without consultation. So copies of Punch, and copies of the English Catalogue of Books, which are absolutely key in my area, disappeared. And, and they are… they may still be somewhere in a store but they're not any, they're not places I can send students to easily look.

Interviewer

Have you told anybody?

Respondent

Yes I raised it and we've had a conversation about it. And yeah, it happened in various areas, it's not just mine, obviously. So yeah I find, being able to send students to look at physical copies of books is more difficult now. And I also think that you keep… they're so immersed in the digital age that you have to keep telling them not to believe everything they see on the screen and if its primary material on screen, they sometimes feel like it's a foreign language and misinterpret it. So I think, you know, that's something that needs to be addressed really. Does that answer your question?

Interviewer

Yes. Thank you. Can I ask how you reference or cite primary sources?

Respondent

Yeah, this is again a perennial question. I've got a whole guidance sheet for them on how to do that because a URL can be this long (holds hands apart) in a footnote and they panic madly about that. For something like the 19th Century British Library database you give, you know, the normal MHRA (Modern Humanities Research Association) style source of the article, the newspaper, the date, the page number. And then I tell them just to give the short form of the BL (British Library) newspapers online rather the entire URL. So, it's a… it's a negotiation, because every university does it differently. It would be nice to have a standard way of doing it. In the B (project name) we sort of anticipated this problem, or our wonderful computer designer did, database designer did, and we provide a paste-able citation at bottom of every page, so that people can just, you know. Not everyone does that. So yes, I tell students that they need to use a shortened form. And if in doubt, they can send it to me and I'll help them trim it down. But yeah that's the problem, there's no standard definition of how citations are carried out.

Interviewer

Have you got any questions?

Respondent

Not really, no. Except, is this similar to what other people are doing? I imagine everybody's doing different things with primary sources, with online sources.

Interviewer

Everywhere is slightly different. We went to a different campus last week. And that was so different from History (department) or Music (department). And, yes, it's fascinating.

Respondent

I'm sure it is yeah. I think students... students love it. They love something a little bit off the beaten path.

Interviewer

Exactly. So thanks very much.

Respondent

That's all right.

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