Hands-on Learning

Using Primary Sources as Tools for Information Literacy

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TEACHING AND LEARNING ARE ESSENTIAL COMPONENTS TO THE MISSION of a theological school, seminary, or graduate school of religion. Planning for the implementation and use of special collections and archives in pedagogical contexts such as the classroom benefits the institution, the faculty, the students, and the library. As a result, it is essential that librarians and archivists consider appropriate venues and ways to link their resources and services to the curriculum of the school. Connecting library resources, especially primary documents and archival materials, with the curriculum can demonstrate the value of the library and showcase the educational services it provides for faculty and students. Peter Carini notes the importance of integrating primary sources into the curriculum as ways to "create expert users of primary sources" who are better prepared to "find, interpret, and create narratives using primary sources."[1] As a result, primary sources built into information literacy sessions can intersect with and be integrated into the classroom in interesting and enriching ways.

Librarians and archivists who work with special collections and archives are tasked with planning and implementing creative and engaging solutions to help faculty and students find, access, experience, and use primary resources. Special collections and archival materials intentionally integrated into the educational and curricular design of the classroom experience can help make the instructor's content more applicable to their lives. As Weiner, Morris, and Mykytiuk note, "students benefit from working with archival materials. Students who self-assess their experiences with archival research say they connected with the people whose first-hand accounts they used and that experience made history real for them."[2] At Yale Divinity Library and Drew University Library, experiences within

archives and special collections function as essential components of the overall program of various departments that are charged with connecting faculty and students with primary resources. This relationship is particularly valuable as part of a curriculum and classroom experience that encompasses both institutions. Students find themselves immersed in the original documents of the past and, once exposed to these primary sources, critically engage with the materials and consider how they apply to their present situation.

Special Collections librarians and archivists who provide these services at smaller liberal arts colleges and seminaries are tasked with making faculty and students aware of the primary sources that constitute the archives of the institution, including its rare books, manuscripts, audio/visual materials, and ephemera. Bringing attention to these materials and purposefully providing opportunities for engagement with archival and special collections items and objects helps students to become familiar and comfortable with primary sources and, ultimately, informs how these same resources interact with the narrative and production of secondary sources.

Incorporating special collections and archives into coursework provides opportunities for experiential encounters with primary sources. These encounters, as Hendrickson notes, can capture students' interest and raise the level of engagement in the classroom:

> *Artifacts, material culture objects from the past, fascinate students. They are intrigued with the unknown, consumed with curiosity, and delighted to discover the true identity of these items.*[3]

Introduction and access to these materials create a sense of wonder about the past. Hubbard and Lott echo this idea, noting that "the aesthetic qualities of the items, the hands-on experience, and the act of leaving the classroom to visit a new space all seemed to generate excitement and enthusiasm in the students, which encouraged them to engage in the class investigation of the items and the discussion that followed."[4]

Using primary sources as a means of information literacy raises important historical questions for the present, helps to identify silences in historical narratives, and proposes ways of identifying and interpreting a variety of archival documents addressing social topics such as race, gender, and class. Students working with primary sources can integrate special collections and archival resources into their course projects and use digitized original materials for class presentations. Samuelson and Coker confirm: "The opportunity to examine a historical artifact and draw conclusions about its significance, assisted through carefully focused questions about the value of such objects to a modern researcher, can excite students intellectually and create a gateway through which

the student may then be introduced to the concepts of the session."[5] Integrating special collections and archives into the classroom and having the materials woven into the framework of primary source information literacy can help students become better aware of the past and more critical of the present. This approach can also encourage classroom participants to critically mine and engage with materials that represent both fascinating and troubling historical narratives. These sessions can inspire and confound; they can inform while also dismantling perceptions. This chapter examines how primary sources can be used to support the framework of information literacy in theological and religious educational settings.

Primary Source Guidelines

While the *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* serves as the foundational document for much of this chapter, another document is worth exploring in the context of using primary sources. Developed by a joint task force consisting of representatives from the Rare Book and Manuscript Section of ACRL and the Society of American Archivists, the 2018 *Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy* serve as a valuable complement to and supporting document for information literacy. The document was created in an effort to encourage the use of primary sources by "librarians, archivists, teaching faculty, and others working with college and university students."[6] As noted in the document, these guidelines intersect with other literacies, including information literacy. They were developed with the intention to "be flexible rather than prescriptive and were developed in the spirit of the ACRL *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education,* which articulates a set of interconnected core ideas, knowledge practices, and learning dispositions key to successfully navigating the information landscape more generally."[7]

With this interconnectedness in mind, the authors of this chapter have sought to approach the use of primary and archival materials through a shared lens of information literacy and primary source literacy. We see an indelible connection between the use of primary sources in both the library/archives setting and the classroom as a direct way in which to teach information literacy to students. As detailed in the *Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy,* there are a series of core concepts and learning objectives tied directly to the use of primary sources in instructional settings. The core concepts are connected to analytical skills, ethical considerations, theoretical understanding, and practical considerations.[8] These core concepts will serve as a framework for the discussion in this chapter on the use of primary sources as tools for developing information literacy. In the

following section, we will explore how these core concepts can be used to support student engagement and strengthen information literacy skills. Each of these core concepts is interwoven into the six concepts that "anchor" the information literacy framework. The sections below will explore how each of the core concepts fit within these frames. Each core concept will be enhanced through the inclusion of specific examples of the use of primary sources in classes and other educational interactions.

Authority is Constructed and Contextual

At the center of this information literacy concept is the understanding by learners of what constitutes authority and how to critically question and examine that authority. This is accomplished by encouraging novice learners to "critically examine all evidence … and to ask relevant questions about origins, context, and suitability" of the material they are encountering.[9] This process allows learners to both "respect the expertise that authority represents" and "remain skeptical of the systems that have elevated that authority."[10]

Within the realm of archives and special collections, the authority often rests with the librarians and archivists who work in the institution. For students and researchers, there is an assumption of expertise and power that is aligned with the presentation of material. It is essential, however, that new researchers who are trying to navigate this world of primary source research are aware of the parameters and limitations of this supposed authority. Those professionals who work with primary sources need to be careful not to let the age, condition, or mysterious quality of archival items serve as the reasons for their authority. Just because an item is housed in a special collections library and brought into a reading room does not automatically permeate that item with an unquestioned sense of authority. As noted in the *Framework*, it is critical that students can understand, define, and (most importantly) question the authority of an item or set of items. Not only that, but they should also question the authority of the institutions in which they encounter these primary sources. As part of this questioning, it is helpful to share with them the "behind-the-scenes" structure of the archives or special collections library such as collection development policies, donation history, and institutional purchases. It is also important to librarians and archivists to note their own role in the acquisitions process. The role of individuals in selecting material to add to collections is significant and can greatly influence the tone and tenor of the overall collecting policies. While an institution may have a particular policy or set of guidelines for collecting material, it is up to the individual curators and collection development staff to decide which items

are added, kept, or discarded. In this way, the individual librarians and archivists are the initial arbiters of the institutional collections and have great influence on the material that is preserved for long-term use by students and other researchers.

At Drew University, the foregoing discussion is often connected to the Methodist Library and the United Methodist Archives. Housed at Drew since 1981, the General Commission on Archives and History (GCAH) of the United Methodist Church represents one of the largest holdings of Methodist-related archival material in the world. Drew's Methodist Library of more than 45,000 volumes serves as a natural complement to these archival materials. For students and researchers who visit the Methodist archives and interact with the material found within the building, the combined Methodist resources are unparalleled. A distinction, however, needs to be made between the archival material and the library material. It is important for the Drew and GCAH staff to explain to students what the different types of material represent and how they each have their own sense of "authority" from a research perspective. The GCAH material, for example, is mostly related to the operation of the United Methodist Church and its predecessors. Aside from a few exceptions, the GCAH does not actively collect personal papers or local church collections. This is important for students to know so they can properly understand the archive's areas of authority and collection development policies. The Methodist Library contains a wide variety of printed resources that span the full history of the Methodist movement. In many ways it is the library of record for the denomination, lending it a sense of authority and an assumption from students and researchers that the library contains "all" printed material related to Methodist history. As part of setting expectations for students, the Drew University librarians make it clear that the collection does not contain every single book ever published related to Methodism. In this way, we can help students to see that there are limitations to our own authority.

Information Creation as a Process

Students who encounter primary source material are inclined to assume that the material itself is the final product of the information creation process. A manuscript of a sermon or a letter to a family member looks, at first glance, to be a static document frozen in history. Through the extended use of primary sources, however, students begin to see that the creation process is not a single step. Rather, it is a multi-step process of "researching, creating, revising, and disseminating information."[11]

Sermon manuscripts are particularly useful in explaining the "information creation as process" core concept. By looking at these manuscripts, students can see the editing process on the page and they are required to navigate through different formats and notations to properly understand the authorial intentions of the person writing the sermon. Drew's library contains manuscript sermons of Sylvanus Griswold (1733–1819) while the Yale Divinity Library holds the sermons by Baptist minister Isaac Backus (1724–1806). Each repository contains the original texts as well as later edits and emendations. The changes reflected in these manuscripts give the documents a sense of "action" that would not be seen from a printed version of the final sermon. In addition, Griswold includes dates and places where he delivered the sermon. This information provides both context for dissemination of the text as well as giving students insight into the idea that "information may be perceived differently based on the format in which it is packaged."[12] Griswold's sermon would be understood and interpreted differently by those who heard him give the sermon versus researchers today who read the sermon (including its edits) in a library or archive.

The repackaging of information in different formats is not limited to the archival and primary source items themselves. The ways in which these items are presented to students can influence how material is viewed and understood. For example, seeing a lantern slide in a box is interesting for students to encounter, but placing the slide into a projector and seeing the image projected on a screen is a completely different experience. Similarly, the way that archivists and librarians interact with students can change how students perceive and understand primary source material. Yale Divinity Library offers live online in-class video sessions for courses at schools around the United States as part of their teaching and learning agenda. The librarian has been brought into several classrooms at Brigham Young University, Westmont College, and Albion College by means of video conferencing software. During the session the librarian walks students virtually through the Divinity Library website and presents Yale-owned digitized primary sources related to the topic of the course. These sessions encourage and enable faculty and students to identify and locate primary sources. They also identify and explain the similarities and differences between original analog-based archival objects and their digital surrogates. This distinction is important in helping them to understand the information creation process and how format (analog vs. digital) can alter the way in which a primary source document is researched and understood. One of the ways in which the librarian explores the difference between "traditional and emerging processes of information creation and dissemination"[13] is to show examples of some special collections and archival items that once existed in print but may have been lost or destroyed and are only available in a digital format. These include digitized

surrogates of newspaper or periodical clippings in which the originals were digitized and then discarded during the processing of the collection. Digitization, as is explained to students, provides researchers with access to the information found within the materials without having to use the brittle and fragile newspapers.

Whether it is handwritten sermons from the 18th century, 19th century lantern slides, or long-lost archival items, the creation and dissemination process is important for students to understand and acknowledge as they explore and research with primary source documents. Through interaction with a variety of formats and outputs, students will better understand and be able to recognize how format can change the interpretation of a given resource.

Information Has Value

This core concept relates to the broad understanding that information possesses several dimensions of value, including as a commodity, as a means of education, as a means of influence, and as a means of negotiating and understanding the world. The focus of this concept is largely around attribution and citation, providing researchers with an understanding of their "rights and responsibilities when participating in a community of scholarship."[14] Researchers and students should see themselves as contributors to information and the academic environment, rather than just as consumers or users of information. Even situations in which learners are engaging with material without the express purpose of academic publication, they are taught to properly cite and acknowledge the material at hand. In archives and special collections libraries, part of the citation process is spelled out through official documentation such as finding aids. At both Yale University and Drew University, all finding aids contain citation information that students are required to use when quoting from or discussing a particular archival item. These citations are different from standard bibliographic citations such as MLA or Chicago, so staff at both institutions work with students to ensure that they understand how material is to be properly cited. This approach aligns directly with the *Framework* and its desire to encourage learners to "give credit to the original ideas of others through proper attribution and citation."[15]

The second significant aspect of this core concept is related to the idea that students need to "understand how and why some individuals may be underrepresented or systematically marginalized within the systems that produce and disseminate information."[16] Within archives and special collections libraries, this marginalization can occur both malignantly and benignly. As discussed

above, collection development policies can greatly shape the overall tone and tenor of an institution. As librarians and archivists, we need to be aware of these limitations within our own institutions and explain those to students so they can understand issues related to underrepresentation. At Drew University, for example, there are tremendous holdings related to the history of the Methodist movement, but only a small percentage of those are related to African Methodist Episcopal Church (A.M.E.) history. A major part of Methodist history, the A.M.E. Church needs better primary source representation in the archives. Similarly, at Yale Divinity there is a lack of archival resources from populations who interacted with the missionaries whose collections make up a bulk of the material. Yale does not have a full sense of underrepresented indigenous individuals or groups because they are missing many of the documents of those who were the recipients of missionary work. It is important for librarians and archivists to demonstrate to and inform students how the lack of information requires the researchers to contribute to scholarship that can help fill these voids and enlarge the conversation.

Research as Inquiry

As is evident in the *Framework,* curiosity and answer-seeking is an important aspect of developing information literacy: "Research is iterative and depends upon asking increasingly complex or new questions whose answers in turn develop additional questions or lines of inquiry in any field."[17] The emphasis on open-ended exploration and engagement found within the framework aligns directly with the methodology used for primary source interaction. In particular, the focus on research is key to students' understanding of how to interact with and dissect primary sources. This is particularly evident in the use of archival material, as discussed in the following example.

Unlike most printed texts, which contain a plethora of identifying information such as author, publisher, date, etc., manuscripts are far more inconsistent in both the inclusion and placement of identifying details. A letter from a Civil War solider, for example, may include the date the letter was written but not necessarily the location of where it was written. In their role as researchers, it is important for students to know that even the most basic information may not be readily available in primary source documents such as manuscripts. At Drew University, we demonstrate this fact with a bit of a test for students. When introductory classes, such as research methods courses, visit the archives, we show them a short, hand-written note (Image 1). The note is not signed or dated and does not contain either a "To" or "From" field. Lacking this important

information, the students are left to read through the note and use context clues to help them determine who the author might be. After seeing that the note contains a date (April 11, 1861), a place name (Philadelphia), and descriptive content related to a political appointment, the students are invited to take guesses.
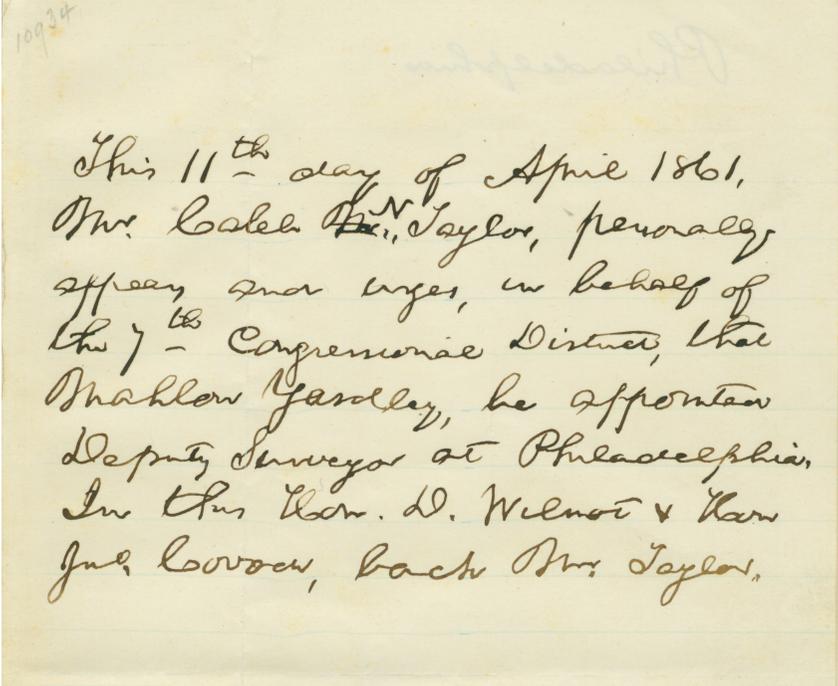

IMAGE 1 - Lincoln note, courtesy of Drew University Special Collections, Madison, NJ

Drew has used this set-up as a demonstration for students at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. Regardless of their experience or research expertise, we have found that students can readily engage with the material and think both critically and creatively in a research setting. The activity is done with groups of students so that they can help one another to arrive at the correct answer. Though it may take a little bit of prodding (or some "helpful hints" from the librarians), all groups inevitably conclude correctly that the note was written by Abraham Lincoln. Upon reaching this conclusion, students exhibit pride in their own detective skills and show an increased interest in the material itself and in the research process as a whole. In this way, we can position the concept of research as inquiry as something akin to problem-solving or even an academic treasure hunt. The pay-off for students is both obvious and encouraging, helping

to strip away some of the stigma of archival research and the potentially daunting nature of working with primary sources.

Scholarship as Conversation

Visiting a special collections library or archive can provide students and researchers with an opportunity to enter a conversation with historical figures through the use of primary sources. In most interactions, these conversations can provide insights for students that take them beyond the classroom setting and the traditional understanding of information literacy. Rather than looking at material through the lens of a publisher, editor, or other arbiter of textual information, students are given a chance to connect directly with the historical actors that inform the secondary and tertiary sources that make up a good deal of their reading and research.

Through their interaction with primary sources, students can develop familiarity with the "sources of evidence, methods, and modes of discourse in the field"[18] and use this familiarity to better understand and interpret scholarly output. Particularly in situations where interpretation of sources is being challenged, having experience with these primary sources is essential to understanding "the changes in scholarly perspective over time"[19] and how these changes can influence or alter a specific discipline. This is not limited to the interaction with a particular archival item but can influence students' broader understanding of academic study:

> Connecting students with these materials early in their academic careers cannot only improve their information literacy skills, but can also enrich their learning experience in other courses, as they will be confident in their ability to access and evaluate these materials for future research projects.[20]

The interaction with primary sources can also enable and encourage students to feel more comfortable discussing their own findings and opinions and encourage scholarly conversations that "provide more avenues in which a wide variety of individuals may have a voice in the conversation."[21]

Student assignments, based in primary sources, can be an important way to develop these conversations. At Drew and Yale, librarians and archivists work with faculty members to develop and support assignments that allow students to use archival materials as a way to engage in-class readings. For example, a Media and Communications class at Drew visited the archives to look at material related to popular culture, underground publications, and fanzines. At the core of the class interaction was a focus on audience and readership. Students were asked to

select an item and consider its potential audience and their overall make-up (age, gender, economic status, etc.). One of the items displayed during the class was *Motive* magazine, a Methodist publication from 1941–1972 aimed at a young adult and college-age audience. While supported financially by the church, the editorship of the magazine was made up of people who were closer in age and life experience to the intended audience. Having their peers in mind, the editors created a magazine that fit with the desires, needs, and expectations of a college-age audience. They addressed issues of concern for those in their late teens and early twenties, including topics that the church itself may not have been completely comfortable addressing (including sexuality, atheism, drug use, and anti-war protests). Students were asked to consider how audience influenced the *Motive* editors, how the church may have influenced the content of the magazine (either directly or indirectly), and how the physical format of the magazine may have influenced readership.

This assignment allowed students to bring archival material into discussion with the readings they did in class related to pop culture and audience consumption. By providing students with access to the physical material, the archives was able to encourage that dialogue between the student and the scholarly text. It helped place the student into the scholarly conversation without them feeling like they did not belong or were not worthy of participation. The archival documents themselves lend the students a sense of authority and scholarly privilege to interact within the larger scholarly discussion.

Searching as Strategic Exploration

If there is one area in which special collections departments and archives struggle with student engagement, it is getting them to walk in the door. In many cases, especially for undergraduate students, the archival reading room is an intimidating and daunting space. There is a stigma associated with the space that can prevent people, especially those who have little to no experience with archival material, from entering. At Drew, this includes the belief that "the archives is only for faculty or visiting researchers" or "that building is only for Methodists". At Yale Divinity Library, helping students overcome the perception that they are not permitted to interact with special collections items or request archival materials unless it is for serious research is a concern we attempt to address on a regular basis. Overcoming these misperceptions is the first step in making students comfortable with using primary source materials. Once we get them in the door, the next step is helping them to locate and work with the material.

Archives and special collections libraries are not like regular circulating libraries. The materials are sometimes harder to find and they cannot be checked out or otherwise circulate. While some material can be found in more traditional ILS catalogs, not everything is included in a single location. Archival collections that have finding aids are very different to navigate than a rare book collection. Teaching students the proper way to search for and access material is an essential step in the primary source information literacy process. One of the most direct and effective ways to aid in this educational process is to have one-on-one meetings with students. These reference interviews can benefit both parties, providing the student with a greater understanding of the types of materials in the archives and how to find them and providing the librarian/archivist with information about the student's project.

Working directly with students will teach them the skills needed to "search more broadly and deeply to determine the most appropriate information"[22] available for their projects. Walking students through the catalog, the finding aids, research guides, and other search tools (including some paper-based resources that have not yet been converted to digital format) will also empower students to feel comfortable doing searches on their own. Expanding search strategies and providing hints, tricks, and tips for better searching practices and patterns is essential to making sure that students can find the primary source material that they need to complete their projects or assignments.

While this close, one-on-one work with students is greatly beneficial, it is not always possible to get students to come in to meet individually. Sometimes it is necessary to go to where the students are rather than waiting for them to come to you. At Drew, special collections staff bring material out to student orientation events, open houses, admissions activities, and other events around campus. The materials, which are presented in a showcase format in table-top cases and protected from possible damage, serve as a teaser of sorts for the items that are housed in the archives building. Attendance at these events has attracted a lot of positive attention in the past few years and has resulted in both a noticeable increase in visitors to the reading room and a greater awareness of the archives around campus.

At Yale, an even more direct outreach program has reaped similar benefits. Staff at the Divinity Library bring students into contact with special collections materials in a non-traditional classroom environment. During the 2018–2019 academic year, they spoke with the chapel staff at Yale Divinity School in an effort to consider new ways to bring special collections materials into the chapel service. The result was a service built around the seven oversized volumes of the St. John's Bible. These lavishly illustrated volumes of the Biblical text written in a calligraphy style were set up at seven stations throughout the chapel and

monitored by library special collections staff. Students read portions of scripture from the various volumes as part of the liturgical readings for the service. The staff highlighted the importance of care for archival items, including washing one's hands prior to working with the special collections materials. A large basin filled with water was placed outside the entrance of the chapel and several dozen towels were made available for attendees to dry their hands before interacting with the Bible. The library staff then gave a brief talk on the ritual of handwashing as part of working with archival materials and spoke about how experiencing the archive as a researcher can, for some, be a religious or spiritual encounter with the past. Students who read from the volumes actively engaged with special collections materials during the service and the remainder of the faculty and students who had attended the service were able to spend time viewing the various volumes, turning the pages and engaging with the primary sources. This not only brought material directly to the students in a comfortable and known space but also raised awareness of the types of material available for research and use at Yale Divinity Library.

From in-person visits to reference interviews to materials on display outside the library, the goal is to make items as accessible as possible and easily searchable by students. Without a clear path to locating these valuable materials, there is no opportunity for the growth in learning that primary source materials can offer. Demystifying the archives and enabling students to learn and to expand upon their strategic searching skills will allow for each of the core concepts related to information literacy that were discussed above to come to fruition. While most of the previous examples have involved library and archives staff bringing materials to the students, it is the next step in the process (enabling students to find their own material) that elevates primary source research to a level that expands and reinforces information literacy skills.

As has been examined throughout this chapter, primary sources can successfully be used as tools for the development and practice of information literacy. Specifically, special collections and archival materials can be used to support classroom learning and information literacy as outlined in both the *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* and the *Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy.* The authors hope that the practical and applicable techniques presented in this chapter can aid and inspire librarians and archivists working with students in an academic and theological setting. The chapter documented several successful methods of engaging and interacting with students through the use of special collections materials and archival documents in a hands-on learning and information literacy skill-building environment. As stated in the *Guidelines,* these materials can be used as a theoretical base upon which to discuss real-world examples of how special collections and archival

materials can support information literacy and ultimately help students "gain important skills that help them navigate the use of other information sources, and further develop their critical thinking skills."[23]

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Notes

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6. SAA-ACRL/RBMS Joint Task Force on the Development of Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy (JTF-PSL), *Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2018), 1.

7. SAA-ACRL/RBMS Joint Task Force on the Development of Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy (JTF-PSL), *Guidelines*, 2.

8. See SAA-ACRL/RBMS Joint Task Force on the Development of Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy (JTF-PSL), *Guidelines*, 3–4.

9. ACRL, *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* (Chicago: American Library Association, 2016), 4.

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20. Hubbard and Lotts, 35.

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