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# Embracing Informational and Archival Literacies

## *Challenges and Successes*

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Librarians know that information literacy is developed over a lifetime of learning and growth. In this column, Rebecca Hankins discusses the role that archives can play in teaching information literacy to a variety of patrons, from college students to regional community members. She explores the role that diverse and inclusive archival collections can play in helping patrons understand not only the records that exist but also those that are missing. She also shares strategies that librarians and archivists can use to engage students in accessing archival collections as well as constructing new knowledge.—*Editor*

**W**e are in a strange moment in these United States, where the work of librarians and archivists is vital to counter the movement to delegitimize facts. We hear this disregard for the facts daily on the news and from our political leaders. What is our role as information professionals to ensure that students and our constituents understand and comprehend the value of employing a fact-based criterion for evaluating resources, data, and documentation? As a librarian, I embody the American Library Association's Core Values of Librarianship, which state that all researchers, from the university scholar to the community user, have a right to unfettered and equal access to information.<sup>1</sup> Also, as an archivist I am influenced by ideas that are central to the Society of American Archivists' Core Values of Archivists and Code of Ethics for Archivists, which state, "Access to records is essential in personal, academic, business, and government settings, and use of records should be both welcomed and actively promoted."<sup>2</sup> As an information professional with dual expertise in librarian and archival practices, I understand that different societal values and norms impact how these perspectives and practices are implemented. However, they also are influenced by the institutional structures and ideological traditions embedded within the national educational context.

Information literacy offers a cogent and diverse perspective to work within our academic communities, offering us criteria to use and understand information resources. There are numerous works on the subject of information literacy for the library field, including workshops, assessments, frameworks, guidelines, and even conferences. I remember attending one of the earliest Information Literacy Assessment Workshops in 2003 at the University of Arizona in Tucson, Arizona, so the head winds for this work are pretty strong for librarians. After leaving Arizona, I had to investigate how to

implement some of the information literacy strategies within the archival work I was focusing on at my new job at Cushing Memorial Library and Archives.

Archivists have also come to embrace the ideas of information literacy, molding it within the archival work we do to construct a hybrid we call “archival literacy.” Elizabeth Yakel and Doris Malkmus’s publication *Contextualizing Archival Literacy* and the SAA-ACRL/RBMS joint task force’s “Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy” specifically teach students to recognize when information is needed and how to use primary resources in original research.<sup>3</sup> Archival literacy allows us to provide students and our users with the skills to locate, evaluate, and effectively use primary and secondary resources within our collections. Studies have shown that connecting students with resources that they can relate to in their everyday experiences has a more significant impact on their lifelong learning. It’s important that students “recognize that primary sources enable us to examine the past and thereby gain insights into the human experience.”<sup>4</sup> Archival literacies allow students to see, smell, and touch actual documents, photos, letters, diaries, and writings that provide a sensory experience that can’t be compared to viewing a digital surrogate. These are all issues that are also wrapped up the notions of what and how we collect materials with the archival institution.

Archives and archival collections are becoming increasingly contested spaces. Our traditional view of the two principles of archival collecting—provenance and original order—are now being examined for the problematic nature of how they have been used to silence diverse voices and promote exclusionary practices. Provenance, the original source or ownership of materials, in particular was thought to be an untouchable principle. What archivists are understanding is that often the original source is not known or has been usurped by those in charge or in authority. Two examples of this problem of provenance are the papers of Eldridge Cleaver that are housed at Cushing and the papers of Malcolm X that housed at the Schomburg in New York. Both collections have similar histories, offered not by the individuals but by secondhand parties. Prior to getting the Cleaver papers, which were offered by one of the vendors we use to purchase items, I asked, From where did the papers come? Were they papers offered by Cleaver, who had died years earlier? Were they papers owned by his family? The vendor told me that those papers were purchased from a storage unit owned by someone who had purchased the contents—no relation to Cleaver. In this case, provenance had been destroyed and replaced with someone unrelated to Cleaver or his family. There is a similar story regarding the papers of Malcolm X that were being auctioned by Butterfields, an auction house owned by eBay.<sup>5</sup> This is another example of how provenance is used as a tool for subverting ownership to the one who holds the purse strings. When we speak about and share the Cleaver papers, does knowing this information add to the literacy of our students in understanding how information can and should be questioned?

These are issues for those of us who work to provide students with the tools to question and evaluate information. In the case of the Cleaver and Malcolm X papers, the distortion of provenance did not alter our understanding of the contents of these holdings. But what about the history of those documents that are collected by an agency, institution, or country where biases and/or the silencing of dissenting voices is often unknown? It is essential that we perform due diligence to ensure our students know how to investigate provenance, understanding that there may be silences within the documentary record. A slave record is often from the point of view of the slave owner, police records often provide only the viewpoint of the recording officer, a newspaper article that discusses an incident is from the journalist’s vision—and yet all of these are documents often found in archives. Biases are inherently a part of any record created. Alex H. Poole’s recent article in *American Archivist* titled “The Strange Career of Jim Crow Archives: Race, Space, and History in the Mid-Twentieth-Century American South” notes that “the archive is never a neutral space.”<sup>6</sup> Someone’s biases, preferences, and conceptions of what is important have long-term consequences for what we deem historical or whose history we value. What is the responsibility of archivists in discussing these issues while allowing researchers to conduct research? This is a challenge to all of us—that is, archivists, librarians, and historians—to make our repositories more diverse and inclusive in our collections and collecting policies.

Developing diverse collections is essential to the work of archivists and librarians, but providing access is equally important. Archival literacies employ access as an outreach tool to teach students how to locate relevant materials for their research. Understanding the research process and evaluating the information retrieved are skills needed to develop fact-based writing that solves problems and/or finds solutions. How can we provide our students and other users with the skill sets to make informed choices and assess the value of documentation, ensuring that they can ask the questions to evaluate the quality and relevance of materials? As a long-time archivist and librarian, it has been important for me to build research collections for scholarly consumption by the university and the public. My commitment to exposing students to the excellence represented in diverse collections is manifest in my work to infuse all of Texas A&M University Libraries’ holdings with diverse materials, particularly emphasizing race, gender, and sexuality.

The examples below discuss how I’ve used diverse collections, connecting archival and information literacies to these materials to teach and encourage students and our researchers, both academic and community users, to ask the questions and develop the criteria needed to create new knowledge and fact-based research. The three examples I write about offer methods to others in working with students: a module to prevent technophobia using information literacy, a student-centered exhibition that employed archival literacies, and a local community newsletter column on

finding Islamic resources online that uses information and archival literacy framing.

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## TECHNOPHOBIA AND INFORMATION LITERACY

Based on my training at the previously mentioned information literacy workshop at the University of Arizona, I worked on developing a project that incorporated assessment strategies. I collaborated with PhD student Paula Buchanan on a project titled “The Role of Technophobia in Computer Literacy: How to Measure and Counteract Technophobia in Order to Increase Computer and Information Literacy.”

We developed an information literacy pedagogical perspective and practice of instruction that noted that although many students are comfortable using various types of technology and social networking to communicate—such as text messaging, Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, blogs, and so on—they often experience difficulty when using professional or educational technology tools like university web portals, Blackboard, or Microsoft Office applications. Moreover, many of them are unprepared when entering higher education, as they too often lack the skills needed to retrieve, analyze, and communicate information that is available online. Students’ lack of comprehension and computer literacy when using technology for professional or academic use has often been called *technophobia*. This “technophobia” has a direct impact on students’ ability to be information literate. We determined that computer literacy is one of the primary components of information literacy, and that increasing students’ computer literacy may lead to a decrease in technophobia for students.

Our project proposed to teach undergraduate and graduate students the primary components of information and computer literacy that was necessary and strategic within the educational enterprise to help them traverse the astounding amounts of available information, both in print and electronic. Our instruction sessions provided them with the ability to recognize when information is needed and the skills to locate, evaluate, and effectively use that information, forming the basis for lifelong learning.

Pre- and post-testing for literacy competencies were performed with each participant and evaluated. Formulating effective research strategies was one measured competency; evaluating information for its relevancy, authority, coverage, and accuracy was another; and finally examining information for comprehension and usage was another approach.

I grounded most of my instruction in information and archival literacies using resource-based learning, moving away from the passive lecture model of education to a more active research model. Resource-based learning theorizes that if students are to continue learning throughout their lives, they must be able to access, evaluate, organize, and present information from all the real-world sources existing in today’s information society.<sup>7</sup> Archives are natural partners

for this type of instruction because they house documents, media, and archival source material that presents stories from a first-person perspective.

I proposed the use of oral histories, community engagement, and other opportunities to involve a variety of individuals in the educational process. Depending on technology and access policies, using these archival documentation strategies allows us to engage students face to face and solve concerns or issues on a more personal level. Learning how oral history projects are developed, what questions are most effective in drawing out relevant narratives, and the interview process that uses both digital and analog technology are areas we discussed. Finally, work centered on integrating critical-thinking skills and understanding how to apply and analyze the knowledge discovered in instruction sessions. Oral histories allow students to be responsible for identifying subjects, researching questions, solving any technical or operational problems, and even appending stories with first-person accounts that bring alive archival histories and collections. The overall goals of this oral history project were to alleviate technophobia, engage students in learning how to use archival documentation, and implement information and archival literacies.

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## EXHIBITS AND ARCHIVAL LITERACIES

In 2010 and 2011 my colleague LaVerne Gray, an instructional librarian at Texas A&M University, taught a course on hip-hop as a cultural, historical, and artistic movement within the United States. Her students learned the history of the movement with its genesis within the African American and Caribbean communities of New York. The students learned about the founders of the hip-hop style as well as the style’s transition into a respected form of cultural and artistic expression. The students’ final project was the development of an exhibition that was displayed within the library for all to view. The class was charged with creating a culturally relevant historical exhibit using materials and artifacts that represent hip-hop history and culture. My colleague asked me to work with her students on the development of the exhibits, which allowed me to discuss archival literacies with the students as they chose their documents, engaged in research to find relevant resources to describe the exhibit, and finally to install the exhibit to maximize viewing.

From my reading of Yakel and Torres’s discussion of archival literacies in their article “AI: Archival Intelligence and User Expertise,” students need to understand that archival rules, meanings, and concepts help to extract relevant information from archival collections, which allows users to move beyond the physical descriptions to understanding the function in discovering materials.<sup>8</sup> After working through this concept of archival literacies that speaks to what, who, and why documents are created, the students first were instructed on how to research relevant information on the various subjects, individuals, and music styles. There are

a number of archival hip-hop collections that the students could use to discover more information. Some of these collections included the Houston Hip Hop Research Collection at the University of Houston Libraries, which documents the art form and artists in Houston; the Tupac Amaru Shakur Collection at the Atlanta University Center; and the HipHopArchive.com website—to name a few of the archival collections available. Students were divided into groups to choose areas they would focus on to make sure there was no overlap. Students had to ask themselves such questions as, Who was the audience for the exhibit? For this exhibit, the audience included other undergraduate students and hip-hop admirers as well as those who were uninformed. We then discussed the various types of exhibits they could develop and the exhibit cases or space available for the exhibit. Were there only exhibit cases available? What type? Tall, wide, or small? Could the students use wall space? What type of documents could be used—posters, photographs, books, magazines, records? What are some other available resources—music, video, audio, artwork, or digital materials?

After deciding on the materials students would use, we discussed the importance of colors and background that is inviting and visually appealing, while also maintaining compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act. We then discussed what the descriptive text should say and how should it be displayed. We talked about developing text for exhibits that should inform, instruct, and interpret. Depending on the exhibit, text should be short descriptions and font size should be twelve or fourteen points. Arial, Verdana, Tahoma, and other sans serif fonts are versions of typeface that are often more legible, and all of these are recommended fonts by the US Department of Health and Human Services.<sup>9</sup> The students were shown different versions of exhibits as models for their projects. After installing the exhibit materials, photographs were taken and a reference list of websites and collections was created as take-away handouts for viewers.

Exhibits are great projects for teaching archival literacies: learning how to find relevant resources, analyzing the material for its connection to the art form and artists, asking the right questions for interpreting, and creating descriptive labels. Installing the exhibit provides students an opportunity to see their work put into practice and available for immediate feedback from the public. The students received compliments on the presentation and all of their handouts were taken, data that could be measured to show effectiveness and interest. The knowledge learned in the course and in the development of the exhibit represent lifelong learning for the students and pride in what they accomplished.

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### COMMUNITY COLLABORATIONS AND INFORMATION AND ARCHIVAL LITERACIES

In February 2004, I met a group of Muslim women from Tyler, Texas, who had come to College Station for a seminar. During

the seminar I started talking with one of the women who mentioned that she published a small circulation newsletter called the *East Texas Islamic Society Ladies Newsletter*, which included recipes, local news, and information on the small Muslim community in Tyler. We spoke about ways to stay in touch and anything I could do to assist with their newsletters. She asked me if I could write a short column on strategies to find the best online resources relevant to Muslims that she would publish in her monthly newsletter. She started with a profile on me and informing her community about my work, expertise, and credentials to write about online sources.

After the introduction, I chose the first subject: “Islamic Online Resources: A Practical Guide to Finding Information on Islam.” The column used information and archival literacy as guides. I wrote about how librarians and archivists are experts in evaluating, organizing, and providing access to information. I wrote about the positive and negative characteristics of the internet and e-mail, and how anyone with a computer can write anything, publish, and claim authority. How does one determine what is accurate or false? My stated purpose was to provide the skills to evaluate internet information on Islam and Muslims, both archival and virtual, but also provide readers “with the tools that will enable you to detect and discern good information from misinformation.”<sup>10</sup>

I wrote about the five criteria for evaluating websites: accuracy, authority, objectivity, currency, and coverage.<sup>11</sup> All websites also were viewed against Luther College Library’s criteria, “Evaluate Internet Sites,” which notes that all websites should have a header, body, and footer. The Luther College site has been upgraded with new information that goes further to assist readers in evaluating internet sites.<sup>12</sup> I provided links to these sources for further information they could read on the websites. After a thorough discussion of the criteria, I provided example online resources and spoke about the resources using the criteria so they could see how I used the tools. Each source included an annotated description of the source with links for further viewing. I submitted new resources on educational websites, newspaper resources, and religious websites for the next three newsletters, but I had to stop due to the amount of time it took to research, analyze, and write up the column. The editor of the newsletter continued to provide resources using the criteria I had suggested. This is the ultimate goal of sharing literacies—that people can learn from your example and continue the work. In the final analysis, it was a great opportunity to share the work we do, and I received wonderful feedback from the readers.

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### CONCLUSION

This essay started with the concept of ensuring that facts are legitimate and necessary; we in the information professional fields must be the bulwarks against misinformation and those that wish to minimize facts, ensuring that facts and the ways to determine what is true versus what is false

undergird our work. As Professor Jason Johnson, editor of *The Root* blog, notes, “We must resist the urge to normalize ‘fake news’ and ‘alternative facts’ by consciously and consistently not using those terms. Even language is a form of normalization we have to resist.”<sup>13</sup> We have a strategic role as archivists and librarians to provide information and archival literacies, competencies, and assessment skills to our students and researchers, skills that provide them the tools to analyze resources and make informed decisions. We use archival literacy to promote our archival collections and university records that can provide valuable and diverse perspectives that can bring research to life.

The three examples discussed above represent great opportunities to engage the public and students, teaching them through technological, archival, and informational literacies. This type of work can be partnered and used as models with other types, such as economic, medical, and other subject-specific literacies. Oral histories, exhibitions, and community collaborations are ways of gaining support for our institutions and giving back that represent reciprocal learning. Anyone can implement these programs, and I encourage us to consider these types of real-world activities that push literacies to be relevant to our everyday lives.

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