

Active Learning in the Archives:

Teaching Undergraduates about Digital
Archives using Innovative Techniques

Jessica Wagner Webster
Baruch College
LILAC Spring Training
June 7, 2019

Agenda

- ▶ Issues in digital archives and their applications in undergraduate teaching
- ▶ Description of my course
- ▶ Discussion of active learning techniques with examples
- ▶ Conclusions and questions

Digital Archives and Undergraduates

- ▶ Archives work is different from other library work
- ▶ Undergraduates often don't know much about archives
- ▶ Digital archives questions have far-reaching implications for everyone

The Course

- ▶ “Digital Traces: Memory in an Online World”
- ▶ Capped at 25 students, with no prerequisites
- ▶ Met 2x per week for 1 hour and 15 minutes
- ▶ Part of information studies minor, but varied enrollment

Course Objectives

- ▶ Explain the impact of inexpensive, widely-available digital media creation tools on citizen journalism, social movements, and the historical record
- ▶ Identify types of electronic records and their respective longevity (with and without active maintenance)
- ▶ Explain theories and best practices of data migration
- ▶ Discuss how our creation and use of electronic records impacts society differently than our creation and use of analog records
- ▶ Describe how records are generated, stored, and accessed
- ▶ Discuss the pros and cons of electronic records, with respect to concepts like ease of access, ease of records creation, and data security

Units of Study

- ▶ Intro: What are archives?
- ▶ Formats, migration, and obsolescence
- ▶ Photographs, memory, and social media
- ▶ Citizen Journalism and Surveillance
- ▶ Metadata, information security, and power

What is Active Learning?

- ▶ Instructional techniques that encourage student participation or collaboration, and allow students to help steer the course.

What are the benefits?

- ▶ Attention, engagement, synthesis
- ▶ Universal design for learning
- ▶ Learning styles and approaches

Why did I choose it for my course?

- ▶ Practical decisionmaking and applying theory
- ▶ Retraining students' perspectives
- ▶ Challenge of course readings

Activity 1: The CD Donation

- ▶ In-class project
- ▶ Groups or pairs
- ▶ Activity handout
- ▶ With clickers, Plickers, or discussion

Prompt

- ▶ Imagine that you work in the Baruch college archives. Let's say that one of your priorities is documenting student life here at Baruch, and you acquire a CD Rom from the performing arts department. The key principle is: anything you accession, is yours to manage forever. How do we decide whether it's worth saving the items on the CD? What do we need to take into account? In making your selections, think about:
 - ▶ File Size
 - ▶ Format
 - ▶ Compression
 - ▶ Finished versions versus works in progress
 - ▶ Copyright
 - ▶ Ownership

Contents of the CD

- ▶ Word documents of programs for a campus performance of the musical CATS from 2003
- ▶ PDFs of posters from those performances
- ▶ InDesign files for the layout of the posters
- ▶ 200 digital photographs of the events, taken by a university photographer (JPEG format)
- ▶ A video recording of the performance, unedited and uncompressed (MPEG format)
- ▶ A video recording of the performance, edited slightly and compressed, with title cards (MPEG format)
- ▶ MP3s of songs from the musical's Original Broadway Recording album, purchased from iTunes

Activity 2: The Body-Cam Debate

- ▶ Class divided into two teams, pro and con
- ▶ Multi-week assignment
- ▶ Each student writes a short paper on their topic and participates in the debate

Prompt

- ▶ You are a member of the legislature for the city of Cleveland, Ohio. A new law has come before the legislature about whether to implement body cameras for police officers and how to do it.
- ▶ Each of you will be randomly assigned to the pro-body camera or con-body camera position. You will each write a two-to-three page position paper arguing your side. Then, we will debate the topic in class.
- ▶ Whether you've been assigned the pro or con position, make sure you consider the implementation of the program. What features would be necessary to get you to consider switching sides?

Prompt- Variables to Consider

- ▶ Cost of the program
- ▶ Who has access to footage recorded by cameras? Can they edit it, alter it, or delete it? (Consider: members of the police, members of the government, the public, attorneys, and any vendor that supplies software to store or manage the footage.)
- ▶ Who has control to turn cameras on and off?
- ▶ Where are cameras positioned on the body?
- ▶ Can the public access the footage?
- ▶ What procedures are in place to ensure privacy of bystanders in the footage?
- ▶ What kinds of metadata are necessary to locate relevant footage?
- ▶ Where should footage be stored?
- ▶ How long should footage be kept?
- ▶ What are the moral and ethical reasons for taking the position you've taken?
- ▶ What local conditions in Cleveland, Ohio suggest that body cameras should or shouldn't be implemented?
- ▶ What other ways could money be spent by the legislature to accomplish similar goals? (IE, training of the police, community relations, etc.)

Activity 3: The Jigsaw Reading

- ▶ Assigned two readings prior to class
- ▶ Students in pairs, with each getting questions re: one of the readings
- ▶ Each student had to answer questions about their reading and explain the answers to their partner
- ▶ Class discussion follows

Activity 3: The Jigsaw Reading

- ▶ Assigned two readings prior to class
- ▶ Students in pairs, with each getting questions re: one of the readings
- ▶ Each student had to answer questions about their reading and explain the answers to their partner
- ▶ Class discussion follows

Conclusions

- ▶ Students have assumptions and expectations about how digital archiving works that can be hard to dislodge
- ▶ Active learning helps them walk through library labor and helps them appreciate implementation more broadly
- ▶ Big applicable lessons about digital content and the world around them
- ▶ Active learning exercises can be a lot of work for the instructor- but valuable!

Thank you!

► Questions?



Jessica Wagner Webster
Jessica.wagnerwebster@baruch.cuny.edu