

The university archive as teaching resource

From Corporate Service to Curriculum Support



Anna McNally
Assistant Archivist
Archive Services
University of Westminster
a.mcnally@westminster.ac.uk

Over the last seven years, staff at the University of Westminster Archive have sought to increase awareness of the collection as a teaching resource alongside the support we offer for colleagues in corporate services. We started with a two-hour class with history undergraduates, but in 2016–17 we shall be teaching over thirty hours across three faculties, including one dedicated MA module. This article will look at why we have decided to focus on teaching, and which strategies have – and haven't – succeeded.

Introduction

The University of Westminster Archive collects, preserves and provides access to records created by staff and students of the university and its predecessors. With a history dating back to 1838 – encompassing a Victorian gallery of science, a cinema, a travel company and the UK's first Jimi Hendrix gig – the institution's records cover a broad spectrum of life in central London over the last two centuries. The archive also holds the papers of town planners, including Max Lock and Gordon Cullen. While they are an invaluable resource for historians, the collections were predominantly used by external researchers. Archive staff were based in the university's Corporate Services team, providing historical information and archive images for colleagues, but with limited student contact.

An increase in staffing in 2009, ahead of the university's 175th anniversary celebrations, provided an opportunity to raise the archive's profile across the institution. As the new project archivist, I arrived with a great deal of enthusiasm and ideas that I hoped to implement during the four-year project. I looked at the modules being taught across the university and identified several where I thought that the archive collections could potentially be of interest, and I cold-emailed the course leaders. Unsurprisingly this met with no response. However, a carefully targeted meeting at a university social event led to an annual slot on the 'Knowledge, Cultural Memory, Archives and Research' module for MA Visual Culture students. Instead of being a traditional show-and-tell archives session, the class focused on demystifying the role of the archivist, and I realised that I myself was as much of a resource as the collection.¹

Information literacy with archives

I had joined Twitter at the same time as I started working at the University of Westminster and, keen to learn more about the higher education landscape, I began following a number of academic liaison librarians. It became apparent to me that the ideas and concepts around information literacy teaching could be applied to teaching with archival materials. This was a departure from the object-centred approach I had previously, instinctively, adopted.

Although archival appraisal and cataloguing focuses on the informational value of the document, outreach activities have typically promoted the archival objects themselves with their perceived aura and allure. People like to look at 'old stuff', and archivists are only too happy to oblige. However, the 'stuff' itself inevitably constrains your activities. As archivists, we are always trying to balance our desire to have the collection used with our commitment to its long-term preservation. Showing off your 'best' documents and objects involves a complex array of foam supports and weights that is not easily compatible with teaching across a multi-site central London university.

Alongside this, while ours is a rich and varied collection, it is very much a history of the university. Unlike a library, we do not acquire materials specifically to support the current curriculum. While there are some modules that we can explicitly support (e.g. history teaching related to WW1), these are always going to be in the minority.

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With these constraints in mind, we have learnt from the approach of our librarian colleagues and changed the focus of our teaching from our collection to the research skills needed to find and use archives in general. This shift has moved the spotlight from the archive to the archivist and has led to a number of important benefits.

First, and perhaps most importantly, it has dramatically increased the number and variety of departments with which we are working. In the last five years, archives staff have taught classes for architecture, creative writing, fashion, journalism, law, museum studies and photography, despite not holding collections that obviously relate to these areas. The classes use objects from our own archive collections, but by being skills- rather than subject-based, we are able to make a few examples go a long way.

Secondly, and a related point, this approach has enabled us to leave the confines of the reading room and take the archive to the students. This is particularly important in a university where some faculties are a Tube journey away from each other. In the past we have held archive classes either in our small reading room, or at least in the same building, in order to facilitate using large numbers of documents for the session. This often meant that archive sessions fell outside students' normal timetable and so were perceived as optional. Taking inspiration from the embedded librarianship approach, we are now able to offer many more sessions that form part of students' standard timetable. These include thirty-minute introductory slots (with no document handling) as part of a longer research skills class. These are particularly popular with tutors with large undergraduate classes. While hands-on experience for all students continues to be the gold standard we aspire to, we would rather all students had thirty minutes with an archivist than no introduction to archives at all.

Object-based learning

Where we do teach hands-on sessions with documents, we have adopted a philosophy of less is more. Rather than showcasing the jewels of the collection, documents are chosen with specific teaching objectives in mind. This enables us to make use of many of the day-to-day documents in the archive and to spread the handling across the collection – for example, where a session calls for an example of nineteenth-century handwriting, a different example can be used each time the class is run.

Any object-based learning session has to be – most importantly – a student-centred learning opportunity. A typical classroom exercise will involve students working in small groups on one or two documents, and then reporting back on those documents to the rest of the group. While it means students will often leave the session having handled the only one document, they will have been able to look at it in depth, draw their own conclusions and learn from their peers. These types of exercises work best in groups of around 12–35 students and would therefore usually require no more than twenty documents. With careful selection, this is usually a number that can be comfortably carried to another site, and is also a small enough number to be counted in and out by the archivist running the session.

Collaborating with colleagues

Alongside our skills-based teaching, we have also advertised the willingness of the archive team to advise students on archival research beyond the scope of our own collections. Acknowledging that the archive landscape is tricky for even experienced researchers to navigate, we help students to find the collections they need, use online catalogues and advise them on access procedures at the archives they require. Enquiries over the last two years have included subjects ranging from the Ideal Home exhibitions, the Yorkshire Ripper and cockfighting in Haiti. Many of the students are referred

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From Corporate Service to Curriculum Support

to us by their tutors or the academic liaison librarians, and this forms a steadily increasing proportion of our work.

Academic liaison librarians have also been crucial in promoting the archive's teaching offering to faculty and alerting us to potentially relevant modules. Other opportunities have come about as a result of more typical corporate activities (for example, supplying images for websites to promote courses) and through staff who have used the collections for their own research.

Our most fruitful partnership has been with Dr Sara Dominici, a Research Fellow in Visual Culture Studies here at the university, whose forthcoming book *Reading the travel image* draws extensively on our collections. In collaboration with the archive team, she has designed a new postgraduate module, *Engaging the Archive*, as part of the MA in Art & Visual Culture, which ran for the first time this year (2016–17). The module explores themes such as context, authorships, intentionality and audience as well as the conservation restrictions necessary for the display of archival materials and how to navigate an archive catalogue successfully. Most weeks the students use original material that has been carefully selected in order to lead towards critical discussion. For example, controversial material in 1960s student magazines and oral history interviews were used to explore issues of privacy in, and access to, archives. Because the class is taught by both an archivist and a researcher, students appreciate the different perspectives and critical narratives that exist in this area, with readings drawn from both theorists and practitioners.



Fig. 1 Student magazines from the 1960s are a popular resource in the classroom

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Photo courtesy of Dr Sara Dominici

Fig. 2 Students from the Engaging the Archive module visiting the strongrooms.

From Corporate Service to Curriculum Support

My original project post was made permanent in 2013 and this enabled me to focus more on this aspect of my work and to plan further ahead than my original fixed-term role would allow. A reorganisation of the university structure at the beginning of the 2016–17 academic year has now seen the Archive Services team move from the Corporate Services division to a new department of Curriculum Support, where we work alongside our colleagues not only in Library Services but also in Student Affairs (encompassing disability support, employability and learning advice). This move recognises our increasingly student-facing role, but is also a moment for reflection.

Archival metrics have traditionally measured use of the collections by the number of enquiries received and the number of research visits to our searchroom. These will need to be supplemented with student-focused metrics; quantitative measurements like the number of students we have spent time with and for how long, but also attempts to measure the value of those interactions. We are regularly gathering feedback from students and staff on the immediate usefulness of the sessions we have designed, but we have not attempted to gather data on the long-term impact of our teaching. Do the students go on to use archive collections elsewhere – and, if so, do they feel adequately prepared?

In the move from Corporate Services to Curriculum Support, the Archive Services team have developed new skills and built new relationships across

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the university. We continue to learn from our library and academic colleagues, while seeking to demonstrate the particular contribution that we can make as professionals in the modern university.

Reference

- 1 The development of this class was explored in my chapter, 'The archive as theory & reality: engaging with students in cultural and critical studies, in Theimer, K., ed. (2015). Educational programs: innovative practices for archives and special collections, Rowman & Littlefield

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