Go Local!

Using Digital Achieves as Alternative Textbooks in First-Year Writing

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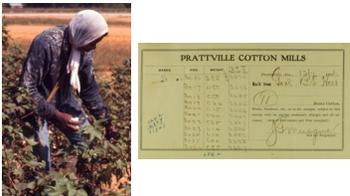
The Project

Go Local! is a collaborative project between a first-year experience librarian, a first-year writing instructor, and a digital collections specialist, in which digitized special collections of a large southeastern public university were used as an alternative to commercial textbooks in an honors freshman composition course.

The objective of this course is to promote the use of digital collections to freshmen in order to fully engage them in the information cycle, bringing key information literacy skills of choosing, finding and evaluating information to the forefront of first-year writing by integrating these skills directly into graded assignments.

Collections in Action

The Working Lives Oral History digital audio collection (http://purl.lib.ua.edu/18402) chronicles the individual experiences of miners in the West Alabama region. Text- and image-based digital collections such as the Woodward Family Papers (http://purl.lib.ua.edu/18316) and Photo Collection (http://purl.lib.ua.edu/18361) provide context, illumination, and new perspectives.

Example 1 – The end of sharecropping

John Garner (http://purl.lib.ua.edu/54304), on leaving the farm:

"In nineteen-and-fourteen and –fifteen, that was that year that the boll weevils took over. … That boll weevil told the farmer he got to have a home and it was in your cotton patch where he had his home at. So we didn't make nothing then, and then we had to leave there 'cause that was our only hope for survival was raising a farm, raising the cotton and corn, potatoes, peanuts, soybeans, okra and rice, everything else on the farm we produced. And then, to make the story short, we had to leave the farm and come to the mills, mines and work for whatever we could find a job, in order to make some money."

(l., http://purl.lib.ua.edu/45714; r., http://purl.lib.ua.edu/55768)

Example 2 – Race relations among industrial workers

Earl Brown (http://purl.lib.ua.edu/54290), on segregation in the mines and mining camps:
"I guess that coal miners, black and white, had a unity and where segregation was everywhere else but there. … In fact of business, it wasn't too much separateness no more than society would separate you because they had the black sign, the white sign and whatnot, but at the mine and dealing with one another it's pretty near was together. Even at the commissary they had the white line and the black line that you go to the meat market. I've seen them many times. At the check office, that was society, but so far as holding up from one another, that was the thing that pulled me the closest to the mine workers than anything was because actually that's something that we didn't deal with, segregation, in there."

(l., http://purl.lib.ua.edu/39986; r., http://purl.lib.ua.edu/39708)

Example 3 -- Unionization

Leon Alexander (http://purl.lib.ua.edu/54284), on bringing the union to the Birmingham area:
"We had nothing but trouble because it was anti-union sentiment throughout the country and especially in the south. … In 1933 John Lewis sent Bill Rainey and Walter Jones into Birmingham to organize this state. It was hard even to organize the small operators and it was next to impossible to organize the giants of the industry, which is Woodward Iron and the U.S. Steel, Republic Steel because they were just anti-union and didn't want the union at all."

(l., http://purl.lib.ua.edu/62413; r., http://purl.lib.ua.edu/42639)
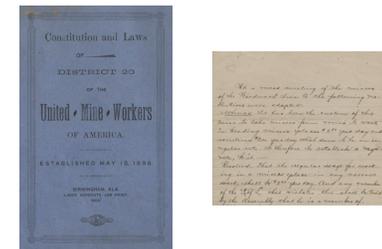
Digital Collections as Alternative Textbooks

As an alternative textbook, the digital collection serves as both a research location and a common reader for the course. Students will begin their research with the collection materials and then expand out with more field and archival research. Additionally, class activities throughout the semester will feature finding, reading, and analyzing collection materials chosen by both students and instructor.

The possibilities for using artifacts from the digital collection are limitless. Part of the fun is encouraging students to explore and report on their findings. Allowing this exploration helps students find a research topic that resonates with them. The digital collection allows students to dip into archival research in a more familiar, comfortable interface before making their way into local archives or setting out to conduct field research. Unlike a traditional (or even electronic) textbook, the digital collection can be curated as specifically or broadly as preferred. An extensive collection can hold instructive surprises for both students and teachers while a smaller collection can lend a sense of security or narrowed focus for the course.

Collaboration is a key component of this alternative textbook proposal. The instructor, librarian, and digitization specialist work closely to ensure that the curated collection meets the course's objectives and expectations. All three must be involved in compiling and using the collection

Course Assignments

Unit 1 – How do they do it?

Students examine writings by authors like Rick Bragg, Gin Phillips, Diane McWhorter, and others to understand how writers develop local projects from their own interests using both field and archival research. Students work to critically read and rhetorically analyze one or more of these texts. Assignment: Rhetorical Analysis (1000 words)

> Students are introduced to the collection and encouraged to begin browsing through it to find images or materials that interest them. They will share these in groups and begin thinking about possible research avenues.

Unit 2 – What am I going to write about?

Students attend library instruction sessions in order to begin preliminary research, evaluate initial sources, and write a synthesis essay to move them toward a specific topic, research track, and project. Assignment: Source Synthesis Essay (1500 words)

> Deeper exploration of the collection occurs here. Freshman experience librarian and digital collections specialist give targeted instruction on using the collection, library, and information technology resources for exploring and focusing possible research topics.
> IL Outcome: Student will choose a collection in order to develop a semester-long research project

Unit 3 – Where do I go from here?

Students use the first two portfolio assignments to practice revision, refine research goals, and reflect upon the process to date. Assignment: First Reflection (750 words)

> Having explored the collection, students work to focus and plan their research strategies. They will decide how to use collection materials (photos, letters, oral histories) within their own projects.
> IL Outcome: Students will determine what secondary source information is needed
>
> for their research in order to support claims that are made using primary documents

Unit 4 – What do I have to say?

Students conduct research (library, Web, field, and archival) to construct a locally based argument about their topic of personal interest. Project components include: promissory abstract, working bibliography, source presentation, and essay. Assignment: Research Argument Project (2500 words)

> Now students are working primarily on blending collection materials with other research to craft their own argument.
> IL Outcome: Student will select relevant keywords in order to conduct a successful search for supporting sources.

Unit 5 – What do I see?

Students create a digital re-mediation or visual revision of their research project, compose a written explanation of the visual, and present both to the class. Assignment: Project/Presentation (500 words)

> Images, sounds, and other textual materials from the collection and students' other research come together in this multi-modal argument focused on a specific audience.
> IL Outcomes: (1) Student will evaluate a source in order to establish relevancy, reliability and appropriateness to research; (2) Student will learn to identify and incorporate scholarly sources into their research in order to support their claim with definitive evidence.

Unit 6 – What did I learn?

Students use the five previous portfolio assignments to practice revision and reflect upon the entire research/writing process. Assignment: Final Reflection (1000 words)

> Students reflect on their work detailing specifically how collection materials shaped their research and arguments.