

Scholars Perspective: Impact of Digitized Collections on Learning and Teaching

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Thank you. I am very happy to be here this morning.

How has the availability of digitized primary source materials changed the way teachers teach? How has the availability of such materials changed the way students learn?

Those are large questions and my remarks today will be brief, fragmentary, and parochial. My remarks will be based partly on the experiences I have had while teaching history at Temple University—a large, ambitious, state-related research university located three miles north of this building. They will be based, too, on the experiences I have had while running Temple’s graduate programs in history and while serving as a director of that university’s general education program.

The basic points I want to make in this talk are pretty simple. Being allowed to learn or teach in a digital world is a wonderful opportunity. However, learning or teaching—or running a library—in a digital world is not without its challenges. Those challenges have to do with what happens when some of functions of physical libraries are taken over by virtual ones, with what sometimes seems to be an epidemic of informational illiteracy, and with the tensions between some of our ideas about access to information and some of the economic realities of the world in which we actually live.

I would like to begin by asking you to reflect with me on five quotations. All of the quotations are slightly fictive, but all of them are true, too.

1. The first quotation comes from one of the historical profession's most notorious and useful curmudgeons. A good deal of the work that historians do, Jack Hexter wrote, gets done "on the steps of Widener or in the New York Public Library or the National Archive or the British Museum or the Bibliothèque National." It consists of gossiping about history and about historians.
2. The second quotation comes from an e-mail that was sent to me by a gifted writer who is not a professional historian. "I'm looking," Ellen Miller wrote, "for an attribution and wondering if you can help point me in the right direction. I have an essay coming out soon that includes a famous bit of spiritual advice: "If the only prayer you ever say in your entire life is 'thank you,' it will be enough." I have Googled that phrase and my search produced dozens of sites that attribute that line to Meister Eckhart. Is there any reason to suppose that Eckhart actually said what people say he said? I'm skeptical."
3. The third quotation comes from a conversation I had with a friend of mine who teaches at Temple. "I saw that note your office sent me inviting me to attend a workshop on helping students develop informational literacy. Please don't take this personally," she told me, "but I have to confess that I cannot for the life of me imagine a worse waste of my time."
4. The fourth quotation comes from a student evaluation for one the courses I teach. "The best book in this course by far was On Bullshit. It was awesome. I had no idea that Princeton philosophy professors could be so cynical and so funny."
5. The fifth and final quotation comes from an e-mail sent to me by a Temple undergraduate named Clay Boggs. Last year, Boggs won a major prize from Temple's Libraries. The prize recognized the excellence of an article that Boggs wrote on the way that anti-Judaic tropes figured in the writings of seventeenth-century Quakers. That article, I am delighted to say, is going to be published in a scholarly journal in the fall of this year.

"What happened was this," Boggs wrote. "I was spending a lot of time in the Quaker collections that are housed at Haverford College. The Web site of Haverford's library was set up in such a way as to almost force me to notice that many of the texts I needed to read were available in EEBO (Early English Books Online). It didn't take me long to figure out that EEBO could be accessed through Temple's libraries. Although I loved working with the originals to be found at Haverford, I also loved using Temple's EEBO. I could access EEBO from my dorm room and from the Tech Center as well as from Paley (Temple's primary library). Being able to access

texts through EEBO made it easy for me to immerse myself in the texts I was writing about.”

That is the end of the quotations. Here is the body of my talk.

Temple has made some very substantial investments in its libraries in recent years. And those investments have been allocated quite shrewdly. Ten years ago, almost no one would have rhapsodized about Temple’s libraries. Now, lots of us do. Whenever I go into Paley it seems to be bustling. There are lots of staff working away. They tend to go out of their way to be helpful. There are lots of students reading or browsing. Often there is talk being delivered in Paley’s lecture hall.

But now I have to make a confession which embarrasses me and which would mortify my beloved mother. I really do not go to Temple’s libraries very much these days. In general, I only go into a library building about twice a week.

A couple of decades ago, if one wanted to use a library—whether it be Paley, Beinecke or Firestone—one generally had to physically enter it. Or at least one had to ask a research assistant to go to the library. That is, of course, no longer the case. When I use Temple’s libraries these days, nineteen times out of twenty, I do so from my office or from my home study. The ratio is similar, I know, for most of my colleagues and for some of my students.

As Boggs’ discussion of using EEBO suggests, our new capacity for using the library without going to the library is, on the whole, a wonderful thing. If Temple did not have access to EEBO, then Boggs would never, I think, have written a publishable paper.

So, I am not here to wax nostalgic about the days when using a library meant going to the library. But there are at least two challenges that are created by our reliance on virtual libraries: the first has to do with the Hexter quotation. In the past century, it was common for professors to run into other professors in the library. And it was also common for professors to run into students. And vice versa. Whenever this happened to me, it made me happy. As an undergraduate and a graduate student, I was always keenly aware that my professors were accomplished historians and that I was not. But I also felt that they and I were part of a common enterprise. Here we are, I would think, on the steps of a great library waiting for the door to open. Or there my mentor is, looking through the papers of Thomas Wolfe, and here I am, reading an obscure pamphlet written by a fundamentalist preacher. Such experiences made me feel that I was part of a common endeavor.

These days, there are lots of time when my students and I are using the library simultaneously but in separate places. I am sitting in my office in the history department; they are in the Tech Center.

The parallel tracks which we are following do not bring us into physical proximity. That sometimes makes it hard for us to realize the communal nature of our project. And our lack of library contact may well have the effect of making my students think that what I do is strange and mysterious. It tends to create the illusion that my “research” and their “studying” are entirely different sorts of activities.

The de-emphasis on brick-and-mortar libraries creates another challenge, as well: these days, a great deal of the service that Temple’s libraries perform is hard to notice. Unless one went out of one’s way, one would never know that Temple was helping Boggs read obscure seventeenth-century diatribes against the Pharisees and the Jews while he was sitting in his dorm room, or that Watt was sitting in his office using JSTOR to access a scholarly article on the religious practices of women in Cairo.

Perhaps I am anxious for nothing, but I sometimes fret that the relative invisibility of much of what university libraries do these days may lead taxpayers, university administrators, faculty, and alumni to underestimate the contribution that libraries are making to the life of the university. Not seeing how well their investments in libraries are paying off, universities might decide to invest their money in less worthy ways.

Let me try to put this more concretely. When one sees Doe Memorial Library—which sits near the heart of Berkeley’s campus—it does not take much of an imagination to see what it is and what it does. It is easy to see that the physical Doe is a remarkable achievement that instantiates the determination of the citizens of California to create a storehouse of the world’s knowledge. Berkeley’s virtual libraries also represent a great achievement, but I fear that that much of what the virtual libraries do is hard to understand. Why, a taxpayer might ask, do we need a virtual library? Googling the Web is free. Do we really need these expensive virtual libraries?

I am actually a big fan of Google, but I know that the answer to the taxpayer’s question is a clear no. What I have not yet figured out is how to coordinate the functions—real and symbolic—that physical libraries perform with those performed by virtual ones. Should we simply accept the fact that physical libraries are destined to become, in the near future, no more than monuments to past? Or should we resign ourselves to finding ways to run—and to fund—both physical and virtual libraries for all eternity?

The hypothetical taxpayer’s comment about what’s wrong with simply Googling the Web bring us back, in a way, to an issue raised by the note I received from Ellen Miller about Meister Eckhart. Miller’s question about whether or not the Web sites she visited are reliable is, of course, exactly the kind of question we historians want our students to ask. And Temple students often ask questions similar to those asked by Miller. Many Temple students—at least the ones who take the courses I teach—do seem to enter the classroom convinced that they are swimming in an informational sea that is chock full of “bullshit” and confused about how to best to

respond to their circumstances. And Miller's question is closely related to a set of issues that the people who designed Temple's new general education program had in mind when they decided that that every single courses in that program ought to be designed in a way that helps students improve their "informational literacy." The people who designed the program believed that Temple students are often overwhelmed by the range of primary sources and secondary works to which they have access. They believed that many of the students that come to Temple have never really participated avidly in what we think of as "library culture" and that some of the students who enroll in Temple have never owned a library card. They wanted general education courses to help Temple students become more savvy users of the physical and digital riches to found in Temple's libraries.

It is also clearly the case that many of Temple's faculty are deeply resistant to making "informational literacy" a major component of their courses. It is not a category that makes much sense to many Temple professors. To many of them, it sounds like the kind of phrase that educational bureaucrats who don't do much teaching or research love to throw around. For many of them, it raises the specter of universities built around "assessing student learning outcomes."

So, there is the bad news: we are living in a world in which there is good reason to believe that students really do need to work on their informational literacy and in which faculty seem resistant to helping them do so.

Here is the good news: our experiences at Temple suggest that this is a challenge that can sometimes be easily negotiated. All one has to do, some of us at Temple are coming to believe, is stop preaching to faculty about the need for them to take an interest in informational literacy and, instead, start asking faculty about their hopes for their students. As soon as one begins to do that—as soon as one begins asking historians, for example, about their hopes—one begins to get answers such as the following:

"I want them to understand that they should read all primary sources with a certain amount of skepticism and that they should be even more skeptical when they are reading secondary works."

"I want them to be able to distinguish between relatively reliable primary sources and ones that are less reliable."

"I want them to see why a particularly text could be a primary source under certain conditions and a secondary work under others."

"I want them to understand the way social power influences which sorts of primary sources get preserved and digitized and which do not."

"I want them to be able to compare the data they get from reading physical primary sources with that they get from reading from digital sources."

(In the interest of time I won't say much more about this. But I do want to note that most Temple history professors seem to have decided that, given the wonderful digital resources in our libraries, there is now no excuse whatsoever for teaching courses that do not involve having students work with primary sources.)

Now, none of the faculty responses to the question about their hopes for their students contains the magic phrase "informational literacy." But that is not really the point, is it?

What I am suggesting is that the way for librarians and administrators to make progress on the issues connected with informational literacy is to familiarize themselves more deeply with the way that scholars in the various disciplines think about the best way of finding reliable sources. Librarians and administrators need, in other words, to do more ethnographic work. Once they do that, is not so difficult to create working coalitions between librarians, administrators and faculty which are tied together by a common goal: helping students learn more about how to make careful and sophisticated use the wealth of sources—physical and electronic—that are contained in the many great university libraries to be found in the United States.

Before I conclude, I should probably say a few words about money.

The 2007-2008 Almanac of Higher Education includes a table that lists the size of the material expenditures of the libraries at 113 colleges and universities. (Those figures, which I realize may not be entirely reliable, are for 2005-2006 academic year.)

The table lists Temple's material expenditures as about \$9 million. The figures for University of Oregon and UC Santa Barbara are about \$5 million. The figures for Syracuse and Case Western are both about \$6 million. The figure for Harvard is \$28 million. That for Yale is \$34.

Those figures remind us of something we all know. Higher education in the United States is sharply stratified. Some institutions are far wealthier than others, and how wealthy a university is determines, to a considerable degree, how good its library is. Great libraries are able to offer their students access to a remarkable range of secondary works and primary sources.

In many fields in the humanities, students who are working on their M.A.s or their Ph.D.s who do not have access to a wide range of primary sources are working at a terrible disadvantage.

What can be done to make sure that graduate students who are working at schools such Syracuse and Oregon and Temple have adequate access to digitized primary sources?

I really do not know.

One option would be to simply accept—or even celebrate—the fact that some American universities are able to offer their graduate students truly extraordinary access to digital primary sources and that others are not.

Another option would be to try to move toward developing a set of loosely-articulated collections of digitized primary sources that contain texts from every era of history and from every part of the globe. The cost of assembling these collections of texts could be borne primarily by taxpayers, corporations, foundations, and by extremely wealthy universities. The primary sources these collections contain would, however, be accessible to students at all of America's colleges.

This is, I know, a scheme that includes some utopian elements. And I realize that there is no danger of it being realized this year or next. Still, I am not at all embarrassed to mention this possibility to the women and men I see before me. For if you would have told me when I was an undergraduate that there would come a time when I would have access to a tool that does what WorldCat does, I would have responded by asking you a question about which sort of recreational drugs you were in the habit of ingesting. The idea of WorldCat would have struck me, in 1979, as the hallucinogenic product of a drug-addled mind.

So, in the present company, trying to imagine the unimaginable may not be such a bad thing to do. OCLC has accomplished the impossible before. I don't see any reason, in principle, why you could not do so again.

Thank you.