Teaching Through the Archives: Text, Collaboration, and Activism

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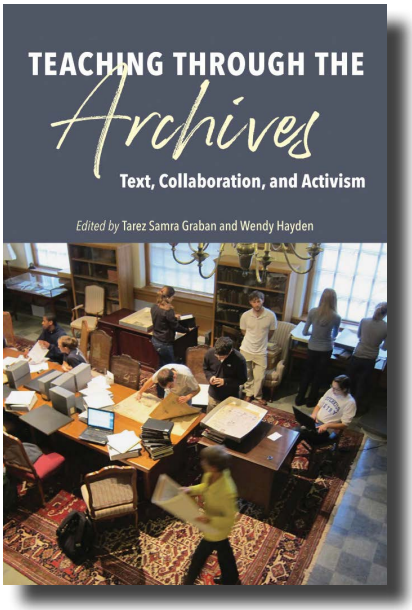

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When I embarked upon my first research project in a physical archive in 2019, I expected that the research, and the scholarship that would later emerge from it, would mostly originate from the artifacts found within the boxes. Instead, nearly all of the academic claims I have been able to make from that collection were the result of collaborations with archivists, researchers, and community members with investments in those artifacts. I was well-trained by archival rhetorics scholarship to perceive the organization of the collection as a rhetorical act to be studied; however, it was Gesa Kirsch, the professor of our graduate seminar, who modeled for me how to build relationships with the community in the archives. In the end, these people were primarily the sources who recounted for me the provenance of the collection: how it originally arrived, how it has evolved since then, and its relationship with various institutional and community stakeholders. Our conversations, not my physical research, are what led me to locate the items that spoke to my interests and developed my research questions further.

In Tarez Samra Graban and Wendy Hayden's edited collection *Teaching Through the Archives: Text, Collaboration, and Activism*, community in the archives is not just serendipitous but is intentional, fulfilling what Neal Lerner wrote thirteen years ago in *Working in the Archives* during the rise of rhetoric's archival turn: "archival research is not merely about the artifacts to be found but is ultimately about the people who have played a role in creating and using these artifacts" (195–6). Graban and Hayden's introduction to the collection takes seriously the archive as social process, expanding from the viewpoint of the researcher to include the students who both learn from and contribute back to the archives, the community members who have a personal stake in the artifacts, the institutions that afford or constrain each archival encounter, and especially the archivists whose labor is valued here not as a "courtesy, but as an integral research methodology for the field" (5). The chapters they selected are intended

to exemplify how they "actively and critically reorient themselves toward *both* the collaboration *and* the archival collection(s)" (5).

This move also highlights what they claim distinguishes rhetoric and composition's archival scholarship from other fields: our "focus on theories of teaching" (5). The questions that guide the collection are: "How do we bring the archives into the classroom? How do students become historians of rhetoric and composition's archives? How do our reflective practices both stem from and contribute to a critical understanding of what to do better?" (5). However, their collection is not limited to the scope of pedagogy but addresses both how we are using archives in our teaching and research while also reflecting on what our patterns of use mean for theory-building about archives in the field. Carving out the archive as a site of "epistemic possibility," the collection serves as more than just an opportunity for "exchanging ideas about teaching or reading in specific archives," which as a reader is already helpful enough on its own, but also forwards a triadic cycle of archival activity that breaks down our work into three interconnected categories: text, collaboration, and activism (14).

These categories divide the collection into its three sections. The 'text' section describes the essays that share "topical inquiry or close/critical reading, and how this approach helps foster the habits of mind that are essential for creating and using archives, for being better stewards of private and public collections, and for making new knowledge practices" (7). The 'collaboration' section features examples of "service learning from the archives" that often lead to "methodological reflection" or "the discovery of shared topics, as we partner with the university archives and archival studies scholars on teaching archival theory and interdisciplinary research" (7, 9). The 'activism' section works "to reveal racial omissions or gender gaps *through* the archives" and features reflections on "the ethical considerations of social justice" (11). The triad, through which all three activities overlap and share "multiple dimensions of the same relationship," presents "an epistemology called *archive*" that may allow for "teaching disruptively with archives" (14, 16).

Part I, 'text,' is work *about* the archives. In this section, authors share assignments that ask students to date unsorted photographs by employing physical context clues in and outside the special collections, assemble timelines of women's history using archival materials, identify and recover women to be included in the rhetorical canon, compose creative nonfiction stories about the people found in the archives, and deconstruct and reassemble once-settled narratives about the history of rhetoric. A key objective of this section is to foreground feminist rhetorics as a foundation for archival scholarship. In chapter one, "Using the Archives to Teach Slow Rhetorics and Create Local Connections," Lisa Mastrangelo challenges her students to trace the "history," "ghost stories," and "traditions" that haunt their (and every) university campus (31). In the process, they must learn "slow research," which is the "slow and careful analysis of documents, the search for information not readily available, and extrapolation of information based on obscure textual clues" (32). As our lives are increasingly marked by hyperattention, the "deep attention" of slow research is both difficult and rewarding for students who find that they research "more effectively" by slowing down and pausing on "patterns and context clues" (32). In chapter two, "Cultivating a

Feminist Consciousness in the University Archive," Lisa Shaver expands Kirsch and Royster's notion of critical imagination from a key archival praxis to a pedagogical exercise, pointing out that the process of critical imagination is often "unspoken and untaught" (48). She offers "inference" as its method, which "requires both evidence and logical reasoning," asking students to connect argument to source by exploring the question, "*What can you logically claim based on this artifact?*" (48).

Part I also asks us to reflect on the student experience of working in archives: What do they learn, feel, and gain from such an assignment? In chapter three, "Arranging Our Emotions: Archival Affects and Emotional Responses," Jane Greer interrogates the pedagogical practice of noting students' emotional reactions to archival materials. We have often relied on their "powerful emotional experiences" as the evidence that our assignments have "impact" or "value" on their learning, but have sometimes failed to interrogate precisely what about the "creation and organization of the archive" has produced "emotional attachments" or "particular affective experiences" (60). Greer performs this mapping in her case study and provides a template for how we can "make space in our classrooms for acknowledging and interrogating" student emotions, as well as connecting them to specific institutional structures (72). In chapter four, "Creative Storytelling: Archives as Sites for Nonfiction Research and Writing," Katherine E. Tirabassi extends the ethical considerations of archival research to other writing workshops. Artifacts provide students with "a resource for creative inspiration, background information, and genre experimentation" while negotiating a shared "code of ethics about creating stories about the past" (76). And in chapter five, "Assembled Trajectories, Perishable Performances, and Teaching from the Harvard Archives," James P. Beasley considers how archival materials might fill gaps in our graduate training. Where traditional approaches have circulated ready-made narratives about the history of rhetorical education that slot certain figures into a "linear development of rhetorical theory," supplementing with tertiary artifacts enabled his seminar students to become active historians who interface with the complex "contingencies of location and institution" that otherwise would have been hidden if they had only read the primary and secondary sources (99, 101).

Part II, 'collaboration,' is work *for* the archives. In this section, authors share assignments that ask students to curate interactive exhibits, preserve project materials for clients and future students, process and evaluate sources about the field of rhetoric and composition, write grant proposals and strategic plans for archivists—*and* that ask instructors to participate in interdisciplinary methods workshops using local collections. In all of these chapters, students and instructors are active contributors to archives themselves. In chapter six, "Internships as *Techne*: Teaching the Archive Through the Museum of Everyday Writing," Jennifer Enoch, et al. employ archiving as an activity where students practice applying keywords in rhetorical theory. *Techne* is the guiding force that informs how students interact with the Museum of Everyday Writing, a digital archive that hosts "texts written by ordinary people in nonacademic and nonprofessional contexts, in order to organize and make sense of their everyday lives and to maintain social relationships" (108). By gaining experience in every as-

pect of archiving—locating, processing, organizing, tagging, editing, curating, marketing, etc.—they come to understand "how writing shapes day-to-day lives" (108).

In chapter seven, "Listening Rhetorically to Build Collaboration and Community in the Archives," Shirley K Rose, et al. upend the dominant research paradigm that would suggest a researcher should first develop a question and then turn to the archives to seek out the answer. Instead, their students "generate and articulate new research questions in the process of listening to the materials they encounter or that might be placed in front of them" (125). Such an ethics of care is also represented in chapter eight, "Recursion and Responsiveness: Archival Pedagogy and Archival Infrastructures in the Same Conversation," in which Jenna Morton-Aiken and Robert Schwegler flesh out what a relational architecture might mean for conducting archival research. Rather than reproduce the traditional "closed" system in which the user enters, observes, and exits "without having left a trace of work behind," they push for mechanisms like folksonomy hashtags that invite users to "'talk back' in order to record and value multiple ways of knowing and doing," building "web[s]" not "hierarch[ies]" (148, 151).

How knowledge is made, preserved, circulated, and remade is foregrounded in the final two chapters of Part II, which both tailor archival pedagogies to the professional and technical communication classrooms. In chapter nine, "<Ex>tending Archives: Digital Archival Practices and Making the Work of Technical Communicators Visible to Students," Erin Brock Carlson, et al. recast keywords in technical communication that describe document processing—"*content management*, *project management*, and *information infrastructures*"—through the lens of an "archival platform," which they posit as a "metaphor for structuring this intermingling of archival practices with technical communication's management of digital content" (158–9). Archival pedagogy offers the traditional client-based course the "reflexive attention" to not only provide "deliverables" and "accompanying documentation" but also the ability to "locate, use, and adapt resources long after their involvement in the project has ended," which is necessary for building long-term relationships with community partners (168–9). Conversely, in chapter ten, "Professional Writing for the Archives: Collaboration and Service Learning in a Proposal Writing Class," Jonathan Buehl, et al. actually approach the archivist as a client and the special collections as their workspace that requires professional communication. They select archival departments because they see them as "already rich sites" for "experiential learning" through service-learning frameworks and provide opportunities for expanding community literacy through genres like grant proposals (180).

Part III, 'activism," is work *through* the archives. In this section, authors share assignments that ask students to collect oral histories from community members, write annual reports and feature profiles for community organizations and their initiatives, revise metadata to be more accessible and searchable, deploy archival materials to create and edit Wikipedia articles, recover important civil rights ephemera, reflect on archival silences, and bridge historical and contemporary social movement rhetorics. One objective of this section is to invite students to think more deeply about where they conduct their research and the community members who inhabit those places.

In chapter eleven, "Delinking Student Perspectives of Place With/in the University Archive," Laura Proszak and Ellen Cushman retool the institutional archive as a site for "speaking back to Western or accepted knowledge-making practices" in which "students imagine and reinvent alternatives to representations with archival documents and the communities represented in the archives" (198). Physical archival research is tied to the work of community engagement, connecting their coursework to the "legacies of interactions that preceded their interactions with community members and the university archive" (199, 206). In chapter twelve, "Archives as Resources for Ethical In(ter)vention in Community-Based Writing," Michael-John DePalma finds that such community-based writing projects that employ archives can develop students' "rhetorical humility," which is a "nuanced understanding of how various social forces create the needs that community partners work to address" (213). By more critically linking "archive" and "community," he argues that we can "heighten writers' awareness of ethical considerations and foster writers' ethical dispositions," pushing us to consider the following question in each of our assignments: "What kinds of writers are we inviting our students to become?" (213).

Part III also explores how community-engaged archival work might open up opportunities for students to witness what the editors termed the "epistemology called *archive*" in action (16). In chapter thirteen, "Learning to (Re)Compose Identities: Creating and Indexing the JHFE Jewish Kentucky Oral History Repository with Undergraduate Researchers and Jewish Rhetorical Practices," Janice W. Fernheimer, et al. develop community-informed archival methods that enact the ways of knowing and doing that are embodied in Jewish rhetorics. Such "collaborative epistemic practices" are implemented in how they interviewed, indexed, and interfaced with people and archival materials, which in turn, helps them to revise "their understanding of what knowledge is, how it is produced, and how they participate in its production and presentation" (231–2). In chapter fourteen, "'Flagged for Deletion': Wikipedia, the Federal Writers' Project, and First-Year Composition," Courtney Rivard harnesses students' digital literacy skills by applying archival sources to Wikipedia editing efforts. In doing so, they practice using their research to make "small ruptures in the systems" that uphold "Western epistemologies" and "to directly impact the historical record through digital writing aimed at a public audience," learning from both their successes and their failures (248, 259).

Finally, Part III demonstrates how we can support social movements through our archival pedagogies. In chapter fifteen, "Is Anyone Sitting Here?: Mirroring Gaillet's 'Survival Steps' in a Community-Based, Justice-Focused Classroom," Jeanne Law-Bohannon and Shiloh Gill Garcia model student-instructor partnerships that engage students in activism outside the university; they argue for us to "compose public works together, collaboratively creating texts that have value to communities outside university walls" (263). These alliances aid community organizations, whose work is time-sensitive, while also creating learning opportunities for students to "find, curate, corroborate, and tell the stories of underrepresented groups who have been forgotten or minimized by history" (276). In chapter sixteen, "'Loving Blackness' as a First-Year Composition Student Learning Outcome in the Archives," the core goal of archival

pedagogy is "to recognize a local antecedent to contemporary social justice efforts that assert the value of Black lives" (279). Responding to students' tendencies to adopt "the language of outrage that merely *described* violence," Michelle S. Hite, et al. utilize archiving as a contextualizing tool for student research by centering "Black survival as an archival artifact" and "loving blackness" as an "epistemological core" (279, 281). This "expanded vocabulary" enables a research agenda for first-year students to "*contemplate*, *study*, and *record* Black life through terms meant for its flourishing" (281).

Readers of *Community Literacy Journal* will no doubt find this collection to be an extensive and dynamic resource for designing and implementing archival activities and assignments at a wide range of scales; for harnessing archives and/or archiving in community-engaged courses, and vice versa; and for composing the language necessary to justify the student learning outcomes of an archival pedagogy in rhetoric, composition, and professional and technical writing. The descriptions are accessible and detailed enough for novices to adopt and experiment with in their own classrooms, while also offering experts new ideas, strategies, readings, and concepts to reinvigorate their existing curricula. Importantly, though, the editors are careful to note that the essays, when considered together, further the field's knowledge about what it means to archive. Of course, the authors expand our definitions of many archival rhetorics keywords: critical imagination (chapter two), emotion (chapter three), the Harvard narrative (chapter five), techne (chapter six), rhetorical listening (chapter seven), place (chapter eleven), and community (chapter twelve) are just a few. Yet, the overarching argument of this collection is that how we present archival research to our students mirrors our own research ethics and the common goals of our field. The 'text-collaboration-activism' triad invites readers to (re)articulate and (re)evaluate the values that drive their research and teaching.

Works Cited

Lerner, Neal. "Archival Research as a Social Process." *Working in the Archives: Practical Research Methods for Rhetoric and Composition*, edited by Alexis E. Ramsey, Wendy B. Sharer, Barbara L'Eplattenier, and Lisa S. Mastrangelo, Southern Illinois UP, 2010, 195–205.