

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Library Philosophy and Practice (e-journal)

Libraries at University of Nebraska-Lincoln

2020

Beyond the Family Tree: Genealogy Instruction as a Gateway to Primary Source Literacy

DeeDee Baldwin

dbaldwin@library.msstate.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/libphilprac>



Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

Baldwin, DeeDee, "Beyond the Family Tree: Genealogy Instruction as a Gateway to Primary Source Literacy" (2020). *Library Philosophy and Practice (e-journal)*. 4684.
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/libphilprac/4684>

Beyond the Family Tree: Genealogy Instruction as a Gateway to Primary Source Literacy

Introduction

Say the word “genealogy” in an academic library, and you are bound to see weary librarians and archivists roll their eyes and sigh. You will probably hear stories about genealogists reciting their entire family histories or asking why every issue of the local newspaper is not searchable online. For many library professionals, “genealogy has often been devalued and relegated to the status of an amateur pursuit” (Hoeve, 2018). Family historians’ persistence and endless curiosity are legendary; as Bremer (2018) jokingly puts it, “An amateur genealogist’s questions are never answered” (p. 20). But academic librarians can do more than accepting genealogists as a frustrating fact of life. They can celebrate “one of the few examples of information seeking in everyday life that requires intensive and extensive use of libraries and archives” (Yakel, 2004a, p. 2), and they can recognize a perfect opportunity to teach primary source literacy concepts to a group that is more than open to learning them.

Literature Review

As early as 1985, Null emphasized the necessity of academic libraries’ opening themselves to serving and working with genealogists: “Perhaps academic librarians, by beginning to look more closely at a subject they have so long ignored, can help to remind everyone once again that all fields of study have their worth and in turn are worthy of respect” (p. 32). More recently, Herskovitz (2012) goes further and advocates for genealogy as its own multidisciplinary academic field.

Because of the common perception of genealogists as older people and/or amateurs (as opposed to students and academics who care about developing rigorous research skills), there may be an assumption that serious researchers care little about genealogy while hobbyists care little about primary source literacy or accurate research. This assumption is wrong on both counts. As others have pointed out (Bremer, 2018; Herskovitz, 2012), genealogy is one of the most popular hobbies in the United States. Though genealogists as a group do skew older (Fulton, 2009, p. 760) and do tend to come from outside academia, librarians should not allow ageism or elitism to distort their ideas about this group’s interests and abilities when it comes to research.

Not only do genealogists care about good research, but “information skills development is central to the hobby” (Fulton, 2009, p. 758). Duff and Johnson (2003) maintain that “genealogists become records experts. . . . They are aware of the various record forms, how they are organized, and how to access them efficiently and effectively” (p. 87). As for a lack of concern about rigorous research, Mills (2003) disputes that claim: “Other branches of history interpret through synthesis and generalization, so that errors in detail rarely affect overall conclusions. Generational history, on the other hand, requires almost scientific precision” (p. 260). Most genealogists can identify with the frustration of going back generations to correct one error in identification.

Furthermore, academic libraries can benefit from the work of their genealogy patrons. Genealogists’ research isn’t only for themselves. Their family histories are often passed down

not only to family members but to local libraries and archives. Indeed, “historians owe [a debt] to genealogists for helping to establish archives and preserve many of the records that family and social historians use” (Null, 1985, p. 32). Preserving this history in a responsible way, therefore, is critical for future historians, even if the family genealogist might not think of her role in such a broad context.

Primary Source Literacy

Yakel (2004b) stresses the importance of “[r]ethinking the paradigm for archival user education toward defining core knowledge and skill sets that would comprise information literacy for primary sources” (p. 64). Recognizing the need for a standard set of learning objectives for primary source literacy, the Society of American Archivists (SAA) and the Association of College and Research Libraries’ Rare Books & Manuscripts Section (ACRL/RBMS) published five broad objectives identified by their Joint Task Force on Primary Source Literacy (JTF-PSL, 2018):

- **Conceptualize**
 - Understand the difference between primary and secondary sources.
 - Identify possible primary sources for a research project.
 - Use primary sources to “generate and refine” research questions.
- **Find and Access**
 - Know where to find possible sources and how to search them.
 - Distinguish between catalogs, databases, finding aids, etc.
 - “Understand the policies and procedures that affect access.”
 - Understand why certain records may not have survived and/or may not have been collected.
 - Understand that historical records may never have existed, may not have survived, or may not be collected and/or publicly accessible.
- **Read, Understand, and Summarize**
 - Incorporate any skills necessary to read the material, i.e. reading old handwriting, using a microfilm reader, etc.
 - Understand the material enough to be able to summarize what it says, who created it, when and why it was created, etc.
- **Interpret, Analyze, and Evaluate**
 - Understand the source’s historical context, point of view of the creator, and intended audience (if any).
 - Identify and question the reasons for gaps in the historical record.
 - “Demonstrate historical empathy,” curiosity, and appreciation.
- **Use and Incorporate**
 - Be able to bring sources together to support an argument.
 - Use appropriate citation and adhere to copyright laws.

Overview of Genealogy Instruction at Mississippi State University Libraries

The author teaches a basic introduction to online genealogy called “Branching Out: Starting a Family Tree on Ancestry.com,” which is offered both in-person (pre-pandemic) and online about twice a semester and once each summer. The workshop consists of two parts: setting up a family tree (creating a free account on Ancestry, starting a tree and entering new people, navigating hints and profile pages, and attaching sources) and using and searching records.

During the Spring 2018 semester, the library offered an Ancestry workshop on a Saturday morning. The library had not offered Saturday workshops before, and this trial was an effort to open the workshop to more community members who might work or have trouble parking on campus during the school week. Attendance was better than expected, and more Saturday sessions were added to the regular rotation of Ancestry workshops.

Some professors offer their students extra credit if they attend at least one library workshop, and the last workshop held each semester is usually filled with students who put it off until the last minute. The Ancestry workshop happened to be the last one offered in the Spring 2019 semester, and it did have far more attendance than usual. Though the students were given the option to listen instead of creating accounts and following along, all of them chose to create accounts and start their trees.

The library’s Coordinator of Manuscripts began offering an introduction to genealogy resources in Special Collections just after each Ancestry workshop, welcoming students and community members alike into the archives. Participants learn about standard rules in archives (“Pencils only!”), as well as how to use online finding aids, request materials from closed stacks, and navigate acid-free boxes filled with letters and other documents.

A genealogy fair offered each June brings dozens of people to the library and into the archives as well. Along with providing opportunities to learn new research tools and to make personal connections, these events have the added benefit of spreading the word about the library’s collections and promoting the archives as a safe repository to which attendees might someday donate their own materials.

In 2019 and 2020, several members of the library faculty participated in “Genealogy Roadshow” presentations at nearby public libraries, teaching Ancestry basics, free online resources, how to use the Mississippi State University archives, and other topics. During the coronavirus lockdown of spring and summer 2020, the author was invited to teach online Ancestry workshops for public libraries in the state.

Using Genealogy to Teach Primary Source Literacy

Genealogy instruction covers each of the Joint Task Force’s primary source literacy objectives to varying degrees. Genealogists must learn what records they might expect to find, how to search those records, how reliable different types of records are, and where certain records can be accessed (if at all). Following are examples of how the author typically covers each objective in her one-hour Ancestry workshops.

Conceptualize. Explain what a primary source is when talking about different types of records. This can be brief and simple, e.g., “Primary sources are records created at the time the person lived, such as census records or the person’s diary. Secondary sources were created later, such as family history books.” Cover some of the most common records used in genealogy: vital records (birth, marriage, and death), church and cemetery records, family items (letters, diaries, albums, scrapbooks, etc.), census records, military records, yearbooks and other school records, and newspapers. Teach attendees how to choose which records to search for a particular individual. What census years should they search? Did the person serve in the military? Might the person be on the Social Security Death Index? What records exist for the state(s) where this person lived? Explain that records sometimes raise questions that lead to more research. If a person has a different mother listed on a later census, it might mean that his biological mother died and his father remarried. The researcher should search death and marriage records to try to answer this question.

Find and access. Show attendees how to find various record sets. The author’s introductory workshops cover the Social Security Death Index, census records, and World War I draft cards. Explain search strategies. This is one of the most detailed segments of the author’s workshops. Examples include searching specific census years instead of using the broad census search, using other family members to find or confirm records, adding date ranges instead of searching exact birth years, and using the location ranges (such as “county or adjacent counties”). Give an example of records being lost or missing; the 1890 census is a great example that is easily incorporated when discussing census records.

Read, understand, and summarize. Most genealogy records can seem fairly straightforward and might not seem to require close reading and interpretation, but genealogists must learn what “hidden” information these records might contain. Always advise attendees to look at the original image and not only the information transcribed from the record. World War I draft cards are the best example of this because so much information on the cards (including occupation, physical description, and nearest relative) is not transcribed. Explain that it can also be helpful to look at neighbors on the census because so many people lived next door or very near to family members. Instructors can also show the original images of census pages or draft cards in order to mention that the handwriting might be difficult to read.

Interpret, analyze, and evaluate. Emphasize that historical records, even official records, have errors. Death certificates are a good example. Someone had to provide the information for the certificate, and he might have made mistakes. Both historians and genealogists learn quickly that “[t]here are no historical resources we can simply *trust*” (Mills, 2015, p. 9). Explain the reasons for census errors and omissions. This is a great opportunity to teach about historical context and questioning sources. The author’s workshops always include the humorous example of people lying about their ages. Other examples include questioning why a person might be listed as “Mulatto,” why names are so often misspelled or even completely wrong, and why it can be so difficult to locate African American ancestors on early census records.

Use and incorporate. Prepare attendees for dealing with conflicting information from different sources, such as headstones and obituaries disagreeing on birth or death dates. How should they decide which information to use? Stress the importance of attaching sources (this requires a subscription on Ancestry but is free on sites such as FamilySearch) or keeping track of them in some other way.

Future Projects

Mississippi State University offers First Year Experience (FYE) classes for incoming freshmen in the fall semester. These classes, worth an hour of credit, are intended to teach valuable skills in various subject areas in fun and interesting ways. The library offered its first FYE class in the Fall 2017 semester. Librarians designed “Cowbell Yell” to teach library research skills in a class about the history and traditions of the university. Using the FYE framework, the author intends to propose a course to teach historical research skills and primary source literacy as students develop their family trees. Teaching and integrating these skills for a full semester will allow for a much deeper exploration of the objectives than one-hour, one-shot workshop sessions.

Conclusion

Genealogists utilize their local public and academic libraries more often and more faithfully than most other groups outside academia, and they use these spaces to conduct in-depth, time-intensive research. People who want to learn how to get started on their family histories attend genealogy workshops whenever they are offered. Once an academic librarian or archivist decides to embrace the benefits of working with genealogy patrons and/or offering genealogy instruction, he or she can harness this audience’s passionate interest in research and discover new ways of teaching information literacy, especially when it comes to primary sources.

References

Bremer, P. (2018). Bridging the gap: Facilitating genealogical research. *Reference Librarian*, 59(1), 19-22.

Carini, P. (2009). Archivists as educators: Integrating primary sources into the curriculum.

Journal of Archival Organization, 7(1-2), 41-50.

Duff, W. M., and C. A. Johnson. (2003). Where is the list with all the names? Information-seeking behavior of genealogists. *American Archivist*, 66(1), 79-95.

Fulton, C. (2009). Quid pro quo: Information sharing in leisure activities. *Library Trends*, 57(4), 753-768.

Greene, M. A. Using college and university archives as instructional materials: A case study and

- an exhortation. *The Midwestern Archivist*, 14(1), 31-38.
- Herskovitz, A. (2012). Suggested taxonomy of genealogy as a multidisciplinary academic research field. *Journal of Multidisciplinary Research*, 4(3), 5-21.
- Hoeve, C. D. (2018). Finding a place for genealogy and family history in the digital humanities. *Digital Library Perspectives*, 34(3), 215–226.
- Mills, E. S. (1999). Working with historical evidence: Genealogical principles and standards. *National Genealogical Society Quarterly*, 87(3), 165-184.
- Mills, E. S. (2003). Genealogy in the "information age": History's new frontier? *National Genealogical Society Quarterly*, 91(4), 260-277.
- Mills, E. S. (2015). *Evidence Explained: Citing History Sources from Artifacts to Cyberspace* (Third). Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company.
- Null, D. G. (1985). Genealogy and Family History in the Academic Library. *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 11(1), 29-33.
- SAA-ACRL/RBMS Joint Task Force on the Development of Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy. (2018). Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy. Retrieved August 1, 2019, from <https://www2.archivists.org/standards/guidelines-for-primary-source-literacy>
- Yakel, E. (2004a). Seeking information, seeking connections, seeking meaning: Genealogists and family historians. *Information Research*, 10(1).
- Yakel, E. (2004b). Information literacy for primary sources: creating a new paradigm for archival researcher education. *OCLC Systems & Services*, 20(2), 61-64.