

Review of *The Teaching with Primary Sources Cookbook*

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Abstract: Review of Porterfield, Julie M. (Ed.) (2021). *The teaching with primary sources cookbook*.

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This workbook, which is part of the ACRL Cookbook Series, contains more than 30 “recipes” for successful interactions in libraries, archives, reading rooms, and classrooms. Edited by Julie M. Porterfield, the included recipes have been assembled and written by 50 librarians, archivists, and other professionals in the field. As Porterfield notes in her introduction, this collection of suggested activities, lesson plans, and student engagements is intended both as “an entry point for those new to teaching with primary sources” as well as offering “experienced instructors” a chance to “refresh their lesson plans” (p. vii). As one of those (dare I say) “experienced” librarians, I went into reading and reviewing this work with a mix of curiosity, excitement, and a bit of doubt as to the effectiveness of such a collection. Are these “recipes” just going to regurgitate the same old things I’ve seen (and been doing) for years? Is this collection really going to help those of us who have been working with students for a while, or is it just for the newly minted among us? I had no doubt that there would be some valuable tricks of the trade within the pages but wondered how much would apply to my own work and experience.

To say that I was pleasantly surprised by the material within the cookbook would be an understatement. What Porterfield has assembled in this engaging and easy-to-navigate work is a wonderful and varied selection of tools that will benefit librarians, archivists, museum professionals, and educators of all stripes. What is particularly helpful within this volume is its organization and (successful) attempt to scaffold the exercises. The text is divided into six main sections, each with a clear and intentional outcome in mind. The Sections are organized in such a way that they build upon one another, even though none of the recipes are written or created by the same people. Through Porterfield’s deft editorial assemblage (alongside more than a few cooking-related puns), these

activities successfully create a purposeful plan of attack for anyone wishing to engage an audience of potential student researchers from first-timers to more seasoned-experts.

The first section of the book (“Meal Prep: Teaching Archival Literacy”) is intended to be used with students who are unfamiliar with the world of archives and special collections. This section provides three activities that will prepare students to move from “What is this place?” to “I get it!” As someone who, at the beginning of each academic year, readies themselves for the arrival of new classes and cohorts, I found this section to be particularly beneficial. The activities presented within were engaging to students while providing a good, basic level of understanding about what can be found in an archival or special collections setting.

The second section of the book (“Good Orderer: Teaching Search and Discovery in Archives and Special Collections”) helps students to become effective researchers by providing them with hands-on instruction with common search tools and strategies. These activities go beyond the standard Boolean searching tips and search engine tricks to actively engage students in the research process. They also go a long way towards demystifying what can easily be an intimidating and daunting process. The instruction opportunities in this section are intended to provide a “low-stakes introduction to archival discovery tools” in a pressure-free environment (p. 13). The final recipe of this section is a particularly valuable activity that helps students to both understand and identify primary sources—using archival material as the core teaching material.

In “Food Critics: Teaching Primary Source Literacy,” the third and largest section of the book, the activities and lessons move towards giving students the tools necessary to analyze those primary sources and turn a critical eye towards the material they have found. This expansive section contains a full third of the total “recipes” in the cookbook, making it the most widely developed and valuable

sections in the volume. Each of the activities in this section look to the students themselves to develop the content of the class activities and discussions. These include students interacting with artist's books, writing postcards, reading poetry, analyzing images, identifying items in the context of social justice, reinforcing information literacy, and other hands-on activities. As noted in one of the recipes, the interaction between students and librarians/archivists is beneficial not only to the students, but also "provides feedback about selecting materials for future classes" (p. 23). The back-and-forth of direct student involvement is on display throughout this section and gives the reader ten various ways in which to actively engage with their student audiences. This section is also representative of the diversity of types of interactions, with single, hour-long classes mixed in with an intensive six-week planning and implementation timeline. Each of these activities, whether a single interaction or a long-term project, has as its goal an increase in the comfort level of students with archival and rare materials: "By providing an opportunity to physically interact with these unique materials, this activity will help build student confidence around using special collections materials" (p. 29). The overall goal of the cookbook to demystify and familiarize students with rare materials is fully on display throughout this section and segues perfectly into the next part of the cookbook.

The first three sections are intended, as Porterfield states, to "focus on specific skills and literacies taught in the archives and special collections environment" (p. vii). Such skills are not only highlighted by the activities in each section but are developed slowly and methodically by following from one activity into the next. While cherry-picking is certainly tempting for experienced special collections and archives educators, I do think it is worth reading through the book in order the first time around to see how these skills and techniques are developed and supported from one lesson to

the next. Once you've done that, it makes it easier to select the recipes that would best fit your own kitchen!

The recipes presented in the first three sections touch on numerous different types of materials, from personal papers to photography collections to artist's books to university archives items. This variety allows for the cookbook to be used in a range of settings. No matter what kinds of material might be found in your institution, there will be an activity in the cookbook that can work specifically with your holdings. And even if a particular material type is discussed, most of the recipes will work if you substitute other "ingredients" without necessitating too much alteration.

Using a variety of "ingredients" is an appropriate representation of the activities outlined in section 4 ("Something from the Cart: Exhibitions as Teaching and Learning"). The five activities in this section allow students to engage with materials in the role of exhibit curator. These activities take the hands-on interactions from the previous section and enable students to be the arbiter of storytelling within special collections and archival settings. The recipes are varied, allowing for a quick, class-length pop-up exhibit, a longer-term student-generated exhibition that is developed over several weeks and multiple class periods, or even a large semester-long curation and exhibition project that includes students from multiple classes. The first activity even provides an option for libraries that do not have their own collections of rare or archival materials. Rather, this activity uses access to other institutions' holdings through digital surrogates and extant online exhibits allowing librarians and students the use of primary sources even without having them on-hand.

This digital environment is the primary "flavor" of section 5 ("Takeout: Teaching with Digital Collections"). Each of the six recipes in this section actively involve digitized collections and digital surrogates as a core ingredient to engage student audiences. They also take the information literacy

lessons explored in sections 1-4 and place them squarely within the context of online tools, digital resources, and electronic databases. In fact, the activities place students in the role of digital navigators and electronic explorers, taking advantage of an institution's existing online resources: "The specific method could be appropriate for any course where the library has access (subscription or open access) to both digital collections and subject databases in the area of study" (p. 79).

The sixth and final Section of the cookbook ("Community Picnics: K-12 and Non-Course-Related Instruction") addresses an audience that most academic librarians and archivists (myself included) do not always think of or account for: K-12 students. These activities, while not aimed at the traditional college/university audience that we are most likely to encounter, do a good job of providing access and engagement opportunities for students who will eventually cross our paths within the college campus environment in a few years' time. By introducing the role of primary sources to students at a young age, librarians, archivists, and other educators can engage this young population early on and build familiarity and enjoyment with archival sources. The five activities in this final section are tailored towards audiences from elementary to high school, but are mostly intended to be "adaptable to a variety of age groups, class sizes, and experience levels" (p. 89). There is even an activity intended for an audience of senior citizens...fully proving that primary sources are for all ages!

Throughout the cookbook, each "recipe" is aligned with the RBMS/SAA Joint *Guidelines for primary source literacy*. The entire text of these guidelines is included as an Appendix at the end of the book, so you can easily check to see which portions of the guidelines are being touched upon or supported by each activity. It is evident throughout the volume that the contributors paid attention not only to the guidelines, but also to the realities of classroom interactions with students. There is a great deal to gain and learn from *The teaching with primary sources cookbook*, but perhaps the best lesson

is that even old chefs can learn new tricks. While every recipe may not be to your taste or fit with your diet, delicious options abound and the cookbook offers a plentiful buffet to choose from. Make the meal your own, but keep these recipes handy to spice up your own cooking!