

Educating Our Public about Diverse Cultural Resources

by Melissa Mannon

As an archivist who is also a librarian, I like to emphasize the importance of educating the public about the research value of cultural heritage resources.

Research skills and information literacy are quickly eroding as the American populace turns to computers to get their information.* In my opinion, colleges should require a research course for all incoming freshman. Ideally, high schools would also offer such a class. Information professionals can fill a vital role by helping their patrons with these skills.

I have recently been reading about the value cultural heritage institutions supply to the public. One of our top missions is to serve a lifelong educational need. The materials we have in our possession hold informational value that we must share. As pro-

fessionals, it is our responsibility to help others evaluate our resources and use them to pursue their educational goals.

To start, we must emphasize the differences between primary and secondary resources. Primary sources are as close to the “truth” as one can get. They are materials created as the result of an activity, often by people who participated in the activity. Secondary sources are materials created by individuals evaluating the activity. They did not necessarily participate in it. Secondary source material is non-original and usually mass-produced such as photocopies or published items including news clippings, books, and articles.

Why is this important?

The use of primary source material lets the researcher evaluate

the event for themselves, rather than viewing the event from the interpretations of others.

For example, my research skills were valuable during the Presidential campaign. I found that the candidates often gave me conflicting information. They told me whatever news benefitted their point of view and they sometimes twisted (massaged?) the truth to put them in a better light. Rather than always relying on their information or on the information disseminated by the media, I would seek original sources to evaluate and make my own decisions.

The Internet is a wonderful tool, but it is a haven for misinformation. Anyone can post anything they want to post online. The only way to find the “truth” is to be able to evaluate the source of information using research skills.

- Cultural heritage resource is the “new” term for the artifacts, documents, and publications that reflect civilization and are generally cared for by repositories such as libraries, archives and museums. The use of this term encourages us to view our materials in a new light — as part of a larger network of resources. When we view our institution as a “cultural heritage” repository, we are encouraged to see our role among a larger network of complementary institutions that serve similar roles.
- The National Forum on Information Literacy defines the term information literacy as “the ability to know when there is a need for information, to be able to identify, locate, evaluate, and effectively use that information for the issue or problem at hand.”



The library of the Andover Historical Society, housing a wide range of cultural heritage resources

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As information collectors and disseminators, we must explain to our public why we make the decisions that we do. Our collection development policies should be easily accessible for our patrons. We must also make information about our collections and the collections themselves available. We must explain why our information is more valuable than much of what can be found on the Internet.

Librarians are generally the best in our related fields at teaching research skills. At the advanced study level in particular, librarians are called upon to develop research classes and handouts about research methods. But archivists and museum

professionals also have vital roles to play in this area. As the keepers of primary sources, curators and archivists would do well to explain the value of their materials.

Educating our public about diverse cultural resources is a prime area for collaborative efforts.

To best help our patrons understand cultural resources, we need to understand the materials cared for by our colleagues. To move toward cooperation in this area (and other areas) we need to learn more about all of our cultural heritage partners — their methods, resources and differences from us. We must see other cultural heritage institutions as partners.

Be prepared to teach those

who enter your repository about research, if they need help in this area. Perform a proper reference interview to determine the materials they seek. Create handouts describing your materials and pathways researchers can follow to garner more information from other “partner” institutions. Create training courses and invite the public to attend to learn more about how to perform research in your relevant subject areas. Post information about research on your web site. Reach out to schools and other appropriate venues to bring your resources and research skills to those who may be interested. With everything your institution does, keep in mind this prime and vital educational mission.



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For more information about her work and for access to past issues of this newsletter see www.archivesinfo.com

RECOMMENDED LINKS

The following resources help define the problem with contemporary research and offer suggestions for using cultural heritage resources to teach critical skills.

The National Forum on Information Literacy -

<http://www.infolit.org/index.html>

Teaching Information Literacy Skills: A Critical Evaluation (a librarian / social studies teacher collaborative research project - discusses the problem with Internet research. A wonderful article!)

<http://www.infotoday.com/MMSchools/mar00/osullivan&scott.htm>

History in the Raw -(The National Archives and Records Administration discusses the value of using primary sources for research)

<http://www.archives.gov/education/history-in-the-raw.html>

Focus on Critical Thinking and Research Skills - A PBS teaching resource for using artifacts and primary source documents

http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/aasl/aaslpubsandjournals/kqweb/kqarchives/volume37/371/KQW37_1PBS.pdf