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## Guided Resource Inquiries: Integrating Archives into Course Learning and Information Literacy Objectives

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# Guided Resource Inquiries: Integrating Archives into Course Learning and Information Literacy Objectives

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## Abstract

At California State University, Northridge (CSUN), many students lack the skills needed to locate, analyze, and apply essential contexts associated with primary sources. Using these sources requires critical inquiry, which is a fundamental theme in pedagogy, the California State University system's Core Competencies, and the Association of College and Research Libraries Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education. The authors piloted a Guided Resource Inquiry (GRI) tool that enables teaching faculty and librarians to create course assignments integrating online primary sources. These assignments deliver relevant information literacy tutorials to students using a single interface. With the GRI students better understood the nature of primary sources and how to analyze them critically in their course work. Additionally, students more fully understood the research process, and were more likely to use primary and archival materials in the future.

*Keywords:* primary sources; archives; special collections; faculty collaboration; online learning; tutorials; library instruction

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# Guided Resource Inquiries: Integrating Archives into Course Learning and Information Literacy Objectives

## Introduction

Many undergraduates lack the contextual subject knowledge and intermediate to advanced research skills necessary to perform traditional archival research. Despite the efforts of archivists, librarians, and teaching faculty to guide students, the absence of critical skills and knowledge is a barrier to using valuable primary sources in special collections departments on university campuses. Two librarians and a group of teaching faculty at California State University, Northridge (CSUN) developed the Guided Resource Inquiry (GRI) to address some of these challenges and incorporate the *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* (ACRL, 2015) in special collections library instruction sessions. The tool and associated templates allow teaching faculty to create assignments, provide context, and integrate primary and secondary sources available online and in the library. Authors designed the tool to work with prompts in the Document-Based Question (DBQ) format, which requires students to engage in document analysis and synthesize knowledge gained from both primary and secondary resources.

## Literature Review

### Document-Based Questions

The DBQ is among the most structured methods for integrating primary sources into course instruction. Since its creation in 1973 by Reverend Giles P. Hayes and Stephen F. Klein (Rothschild, 2000), the DBQ has played an important role in Advanced Placement (AP) history exams for high school students by reducing reliance on memorization in favor of critical interpretations of historical documents. In order to improve student success with DBQs, Stovel (2000) offered teaching techniques for primary source interpretation and analysis in preparation for AP History exams. Drawing from experience as both a teacher and AP exam reader, Rothschild traced the development of DBQs through 1982 when the College Board reduced their number in favor of questions that required students to draw upon secondary sources (Rothschild, 2000). In recognizing the inherent difficulties involved

in interpreting primary documents, Kotzin (2001) promoted students as creators of DBQs to provide a more personal conceptualization for answering them.

Though many educators believe the DBQ format is valuable to student learning, some have challenged the degree to which students benefit. Grant, Gradwell, and Cimbricz (2004) argued educators could consider the DBQ more "authentic" if test takers were asked to derive arguments from primary documents rather than explain their meaning in relation to a prompt.

The literature regarding adaptations of the DBQ in higher learning are scarce. However, Reed and Kromrey (2001) used DBQs to help measure students' inclinations toward critical thinking when using primary documents in a community college course. According to their study, when instructors exposed students in the experimental group to a method for critical analysis those students performed significantly higher on the DBQ portion than others.

#### Primary Sources and Student Learning

Greene (1989) wrote about integrating primary sources into undergraduate education by declaring the relevance of university archives to university curricula. Singleton and Giese (1999) offered a general framework for integrating primary sources in the Library of Congress' online collections and other online repositories. The following year, Matyn (2000) argued for use of primary sources in undergraduate courses, and offered ways in which educators could use them in course instruction.

By 2007, the use of primary sources in student learning contexts had grown significantly. Malkmus (2007) reported on a survey of over 600 American history faculty regarding the integration of primary sources in the classroom. Survey respondents expressed satisfaction working with primary sources despite the inherent challenges. Crew (2008) promoted online sources that document women's roles in wartime. Hussey (2009, 2011), Ward (2012), and Lamb and Johnson (2013) echoed the promise of online primary documents for teaching history using records and ready-made activities offered online, such as those by the National Archives. In response to recent trends in "flipping" the classroom, Westermann (2014) tested the use of online primary sources with hybrid courses; participating students reported enthusiasm for the new format.

Some archivists and librarians have cited online primary sources as offering unique opportunities for collaboration. Brown and Dotson (2007) used primary sources as the point

of collaboration with course instructors in order to combine information literacy with methodology instruction. McCoy (2010) described a project with special collections librarians and a history professor that showed the value of teaching primary source literacy when used as the *source* of a research question rather than support for an already-formed argument. Similarly, Hubbard and Lotts (2013) used a team approach to create information literacy instruction sessions appropriate for lower-division students using primary sources.

Some authors have critically investigated primary source literacy from more practical and sometimes opposing positions. In 1998, Young and Leinhardt tested the potential of DBQs to help students build evidence-based arguments, interpret and understand documents through “comparison and contextualization” (p.46), and “transform source texts to compose new texts” (p.29). Young, et al. (1998) revealed that over the course of a year, a group of students improved their ability to integrate content as evidence, but struggled with critical aspects of evidence-based writing such as weaving arguments into a narrative, establishing causality, and using multiple documents as evidence for a single claim. Despite his support for teaching with primary sources, Barton (2005) attempted to debunk myths regarding primary sources as they pertain to historiography. Among Barton’s assertions is that individual primary sources do not necessarily provide reliable testimony of the past. He therefore argued for the use of multiple sources, both primary and secondary (2005).

Kuhlthau, Caspari, and Maniotes (2007) founded their *Guided Inquiry*, a comprehensive model for PreK-12 information literacy and learning, on decades of research around Kuhlthau's "information search process." Guided Inquiry is process-oriented, and emphasizes a constructivist approach to building knowledge based on the skills and experience possessed by each student. The model showed that students who engage in such inquiries develop higher-order thinking skills as an instructional team guides them through the learning process (Kuhlthau, et al., 2007).

#### The Archivist/Instructor

In recent years librarians and archivists have considered their changing roles in facilitating primary source literacy. Yakel (2004) called for the establishment of information competencies specific to archival research to foster a better understanding of those materials when used outside of in-person reference contexts. Sutton and Knight (2006), and Hensley, Murphy, and Swain (2014) endorsed collaborative library instruction sessions between special collections and instruction librarians. In 2009, Archer, Hanlon, and Levine tested the

use of an online guide for teaching primary source research, which exposed some limitations in students' abilities to define and locate such sources from the guide alone. Also in 2009, Carini challenged archivists to teach research methods in order to provide a basis for primary source literacy instruction. Carini (2016) later created learning outcomes for these literacies based in part on a model produced at Dartmouth College. Morris, Mykytiuk, and Weiner (2014) articulated clear objectives for identifying archives literacy competencies that included a demonstrated ability to understand, locate, and integrate primary sources as evidence for making an argument. In an attempt to build consensus regarding primary source literacy, Daines and Nimer (2015) presented a case for formal development of standards and learning outcomes.

As the use of primary sources in higher education continued to gain favor with course instructors, some researchers assessed the state of primary source literacy and use in academic environments. Krause (2010) examined self-perceptions of 12 archivists and special collections librarians active in teaching primary source literacy. These practitioners did not self-identify as educators, which suggested that greater training within the field is required to realize the potential of archivist/instructors. Malkmus (2010) surveyed 627 academic historians to evaluate their use of primary sources in teaching and learning history; she cited the efficacy of such materials for engaging students, improving subject retention, and developing critical thinking and research skills. Malkmus' survey also revealed that the structured application of archives materials is critical. A survey by Daniels and Yakel (2013) of 452 university students who were given archives orientations revealed that students valued that experience, were more confident using archival materials, and were more likely to use collections in the future.

## Information Literacy at CSUN

The curriculum at CSUN emphasizes undergraduate learning and research. Students must complete a general education requirement focused on information competence (CSUN, 2015) in order to graduate. The campus designed this requirement so students progressively develop information literacy skills at a basic level and within their disciplines. National trends in academic libraries have also manifested themselves on campus in that students increasingly prefer electronic resources via subscription journal databases, and access to e-texts. Instructional faculty overwhelmingly make use of learning management systems (LMSs) when teaching online and hybrid classes.

There are many challenges facing CSUN's Special Collections and Archives unit in this environment. Undergraduates often lack the subject expertise and contextual knowledge required to successfully discover and access archival materials. Despite courses moving online across campus, few online instructional tools exist that cover the kinds of discovery and information evaluation skills needed to successfully find and use archival materials. Additionally, students need to see and handle physical materials from the collections as part of library instruction sessions, even for courses that are ostensibly online only.

The CSUN Digital Collections database offers increased access to archival and historical materials by way of traditional discovery tools. Despite this advantage, databases often obscure or destroy contextual relationships from which individual documents derive so much of their meaning. CSUN archivists and librarians have worked to maintain contextual relationships online; however, database query results do not typically replicate the *original order* of physical collections. Therefore, this essential context is often invisible to users, especially to those who have never accessed archival collections in print. When CSUN students find materials in digital collections, they commonly ask questions of special collections staff that indicate they do not see or read the contextualizing metadata. As a result, archival objects become much less meaningful and usable for student researchers in digital collections environments despite being easier to discover.

#### GRI Tool Objectives

The authors developed the GRI tool as a pilot project to enable online integration of course assignments and primary sources from Special Collections and Archives in the Oviatt Library at CSUN. It performs multiple functions as a sandbox for the delivery of assignment prompts, digitized media, and links to information literacy tutorials and related educational content. In addition to facilitating course and information literacy objectives, it fosters critical thinking through non-linear research simulation.

Assignment prompts that require students to engage in document-based questioning are at the GRI's core. Instructors create prompts that incorporate course-learning objectives through direct engagement with primary resources, thus reinforcing critical analysis of digitized primary documents. Archivists are able to incorporate critical contextual information from finding aids and elsewhere within the tool, which enables students to synthesize knowledge through document analysis, reducing their dependence on memorization. Rather than seeking evidence to support an already-formed opinion, student

arguments emerge from primary evidence. The GRI tool facilitates quick access to primary and secondary sources via links to the library catalog, article databases, and other discovery tools.

The GRI provides primary source literacy instruction via online resources such as websites, guides, and digital learning objects (DLOs) that help students identify primary sources, engage in critical analysis using primary sources, and draw connections between primary and secondary sources as part of the overall assignment. The tool can also include instructions on how to use archival materials in traditional environments, though group or individual visits to Special Collections and Archives can also be a part of the GRI assignment. The instructor may assign any number of additional tools or resources to address other information literacy objectives.

#### GRI Assignment

As a concept for structuring prompts, media, and information literacy content, a GRI assignment can be implemented using any web content platform that can display, embed, or link multimedia: e.g., blog applications, LibGuides, content management systems, or learning management systems. For this pilot project, the authors chose *Scalar*<sup>1</sup> – an open source, semantic web development application with enhanced metadata support, built-in section navigation, and data visualizations. Regardless of what platform is used, archivists and instructors building new GRI assignments can use templates for an efficient workflow. Sections of GRI assignments that focus on information literacy tutorials, for instance, can pre-populate a template, avoiding the need to reload tutorial media, or re-create external links. Figure 1 demonstrates the structure and content of the GRI tool.

Existing policies, procedures, and workflows in Special Collections and Archives at the Oviatt Library largely determined preparation and execution of GRI assignments over the course of the pilot project, as did instructor knowledge of library collections. The process was tiered and proceeded as follows:

1. Instructors selected one or more primary source documents for their course assignment from Special Collections and Archives, Digital Collections, databases, and other online primary source repositories with the assistance of a librarian. Formats included photographs, correspondence, legal documents, videos, diary entries, manuscripts, and newspaper articles. If a selected document did not already



- exist in a digital format, staff in Special Collections and Archives digitized it for the assignment.
2. Instructors wrote and submitted a prompt or assignment to the librarian in Special Collections and Archives. Prompts consisted of open-ended questions that supported critical thinking and engaged students in interpretation and analysis of selected document(s).
  3. Some instructors wished to support general information literacy objectives by appending additional tutorials to the assignment. For instance, one instructor wished to emphasize copyright. The Digital Services Librarian added a link to an appropriate online resource specifically relating to that objective.
  4. The Digital Services Librarian loaded prompts, digital primary source surrogates, and linked tutorials into the GRI tool for each respective course.
  5. The Digital Services Librarian sent a link for the GRI assignment to the instructor to post to the course management site.
  6. Students submitted their assignments according to their instructor's preferences.

**Figure 1: Sample GRI assignment page with instructions, prompt, navigation menu, and media**

The screenshot shows a web interface for a Guided Resource Inquiry (GRI) assignment. On the left is a navigation menu titled "Guided Resource Inquiry: Sample AFRS271" with a "Main menu" dropdown containing four items: "1. Assignment A: Pt. 1", "2. Assignment A: Pt. 2", "3. Assignment B", and "4. Assignment C". Below the menu is a search bar and "View" and "Recent" options. The main content area is titled "Guided Resource Inquiry: Sample AFRS271" and "Assignment A: Pt. 1". It features a sub-heading "African-American History to 1865" and "Instructions:" which includes two bullet points: "Analyze one source (right) to complete the prompt below." and "Use the navigation menu (left) to complete part 2 of this assignment." Below the instructions is a "Prompt:" section with a paragraph: "As a group or as individuals select one of the primary sources listed below and displayed on this page. Write a brief essay (500 words minimum, 800 words maximum) in which you:" followed by five bullet points: "Identify the source you've chosen.", "Determine the type of document, its creator, when it was created, and where.", "Determine the reason for the document's production.", "Determine the author or creator's relationship to Abolitionism in the United States in the decades leading up to the Civil War.", and "Explain how the item contextualizes Abolitionism with respect to assigned course readings." On the right side, there are two media items: "The Virginia Housekeeper" illustration, which shows a group of people in a domestic setting, and "John Brown Letter, 1855", which is a scanned document with handwritten text.

## Method

Authors recruited four CSUN instructors teaching six classes as part of the GRI pilot project. The instructors distributed a hyperlink to an anonymous test, which asked students to identify primary sources from a selected list of document types both before and after they completed their assignments. Additionally, the authors administered a survey with a post-test to measure student perceptions of the GRI tool. The survey gathered feedback regarding the tool itself and student perceptions of working with primary and historical sources in coursework. The tests and survey addressed the following research questions:

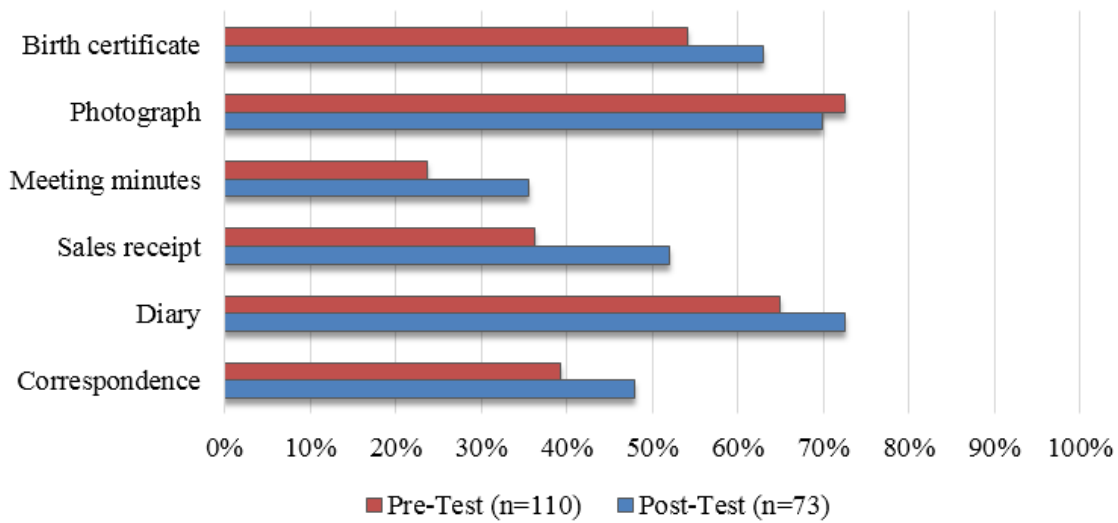
1. How effective is the GRI tool at improving student understanding of the characteristics of primary sources?
2. To what extent does the GRI tool help students integrate primary and historical sources in their assignments?
3. How effective is the GRI tool and assignment as a means of outreach? Are students and faculty members more likely to use archives after having experienced the GRI pilot?

Of the six courses taught by participating faculty instructors, three were lower-division undergraduate, two were upper-division undergraduate, and one was graduate-level. The represented departments were English, History, and Communications. Three classes received in-person instruction sessions at the request of faculty instructors. Authors did not intend to split these GRI student participants between experimental and control groups, but they did gather and analyze data regarding these two groups.

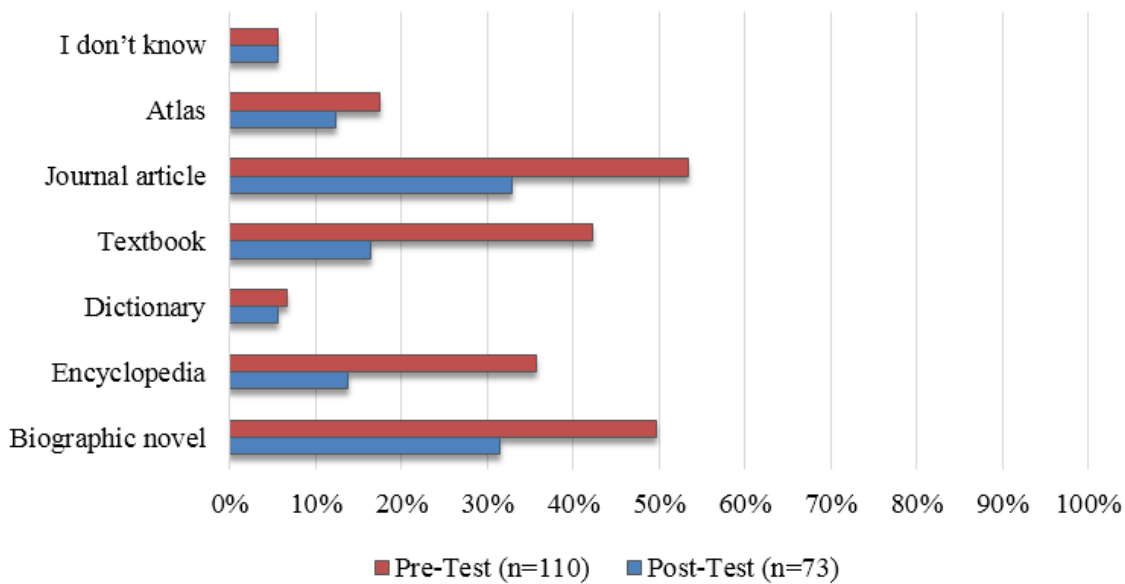
## Findings and Analysis

Pre-tests and post-tests prompted students to identify primary sources from a list of 12 document types within the following hypothetical research context (Figures 2 and 3): *While working on a research project focused on the US Civil War, you discover relevant resources in numerous formats. Identify the primary sources below (select all that apply).*

**Figure 2: Percentage of correctly identified primary sources**



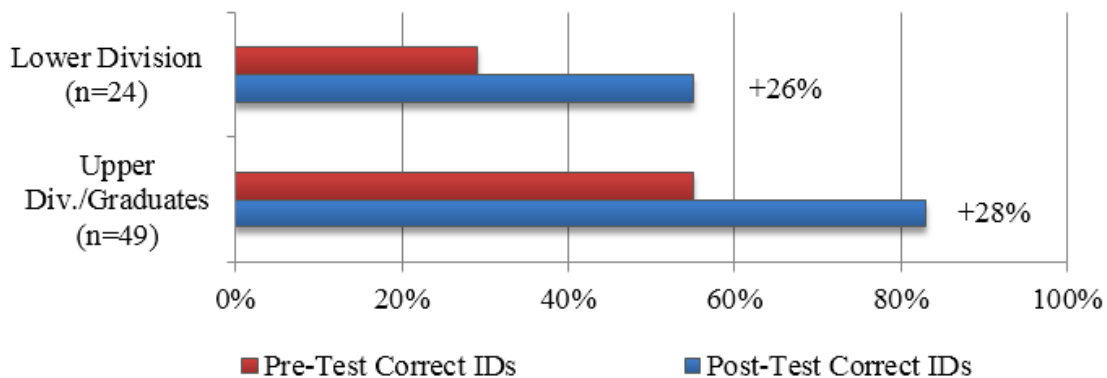
**Figure 3: Percentage of incorrectly identified primary sources**



On average, the 110 pre-test respondents correctly identified 50% of the primary sources, while the 73 post-test respondents correctly identified 74% of the same primary sources. Authors also analyzed data according to class level. Results from the pre-test indicate the 64 students enrolled in lower-division courses correctly identified an average of 29% of the primary sources. Upon completing the GRI assignments, 24 students in lower-division

courses correctly identified 55% of the sources for an increase of +26%. On average, 46 upper-division undergraduate and graduate students correctly identified 55% of the primary sources on the pre-test, and 49 identified 83% on the post-test, improving their performance by 28% overall (Figure 4).

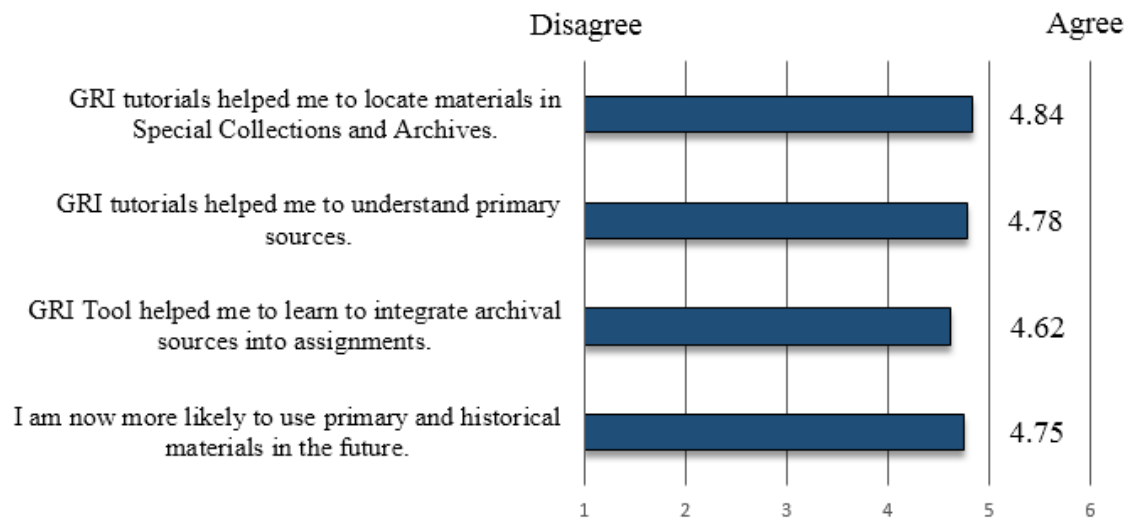
**Figure 4: Correct primary sources identified according to lower division students and upper division students in pre- and post-tests**



Authors compared pre- and post-test responses of those who had attended an information literacy session in Special Collections and Archives prior to or as part of the GRI assignment to those who did not. Thirty-eight students who attended a session correctly identified 87% of the sources, as compared to 65% of the 35 students who only used the tutorials provided in the GRI tool.

The authors asked participating students to give feedback (Figure 5) regarding their experience with the GRI tool and assignment as it pertained to specific objectives of the pilot. Using a 6-point scale, this survey measured students' level of agreement regarding the effectiveness of the tool and assignment.

**Figure 5: Student respondents identified how strongly they agreed with statements describing their experience with the GRI tool**



Averages are on a 6-point Likert scale from 1 (disagree) to 6 (agree)

How effective is the GRI tool at improving student understanding of primary source characteristics?

Based on pre-tests, post-tests, and survey data, the GRI tool and assignment was moderately successful at teaching the use of primary sources in assignments. Student knowledge improved after completing the assignment, but it is clear that fewer students who only used tutorials mastered the differences between primary and other information sources. Accordingly, the authors want to analyze and test tutorials further for their success at teaching students what primary sources are and how to use them as evidence in research.

Data suggests a positive correlation between class-level and post-test success rates, as students taking upper-division and graduate courses were significantly better at identifying primary sources for the hypothetical prompt (83% correctly identified). Students with less college experience (i.e., those from the lower-division classes) had the least success identifying primary sources (55% correctly identified), but they demonstrated a significant improvement between pre- and post-tests (+26%). The authors conclude that students at this learning-centered institution require greater emphasis on teaching primary research concepts, and that freshmen would benefit from new tutorials specifically designed for their use.

Those students who had in-person primary research instruction were most successful on the post-test (87% correct identifications). While data indicates the GRI as a stand-alone tool was moderately effective for teaching primary source identifications (24 percentage-point increase in correct identifications in the post-tests), the tool is not a substitute for in-person instruction. More likely, it is a supplemental tool for teaching and executing primary research assignments. To achieve the goal of providing a reliable medium for reaching large numbers of students online, the authors should develop and test more varied and robust tutorials.

To what extent does the GRI tool help students integrate primary and historical sources in their assignments? The authors gathered data to learn student perceptions of how effectively the tool integrated their assignment prompts with primary source materials. On average, students agreed that the GRI tool helped them locate archival materials (4.84/6 rating) and integrate them into their assignments (4.62/6 rating).

How effective is the GRI tool and assignment as a means of outreach? Are students and faculty more likely to use archives after having experienced the GRI pilot?

The GRI pilot inherently functioned as an outreach tool; its execution required a collaborative relationship between librarians, archivists, and course instructors. A goal of the pilot was to integrate primary sources and course content collaboratively, rather than requiring instructors to adopt ready-made primary source assignments. While this was a challenging goal, it is satisfying to note the experience of the students was largely positive; many agreed they were more likely to use primary and historical sources in the future (4.75/6 rating).

## Discussion and Conclusion

The GRI pilot project was a success in many respects. Student and instructor feedback indicates the assignments were challenging but rewarding. The tool was effective in helping students to understand what primary sources are and how to analyze them critically in their course work. Students who used the tool also showed improvement in understanding the research process, and were more likely to come back to Special Collections and Archives to use materials, even in print, for future assignments.

Data from the pilot project possess some known limitations. These include the following:

1. Respondents were students enrolled in courses taught by four faculty instructors who chose to include their classes in the pilot. The sample size is small and not representative of the larger student population.
2. Instructors initiated data collection when they distributed pre-tests, post-tests, and surveys to students. The level of class participation was therefore beyond the control of the authors, which produced different numbers of respondents between pre- and post-tests.
3. Authors did not use a control group of non-GRI users against which the authors could measure the GRI tool's impact. All students in the pilot used the GRI tool to complete the assignment.

Not every phase of this project proceeded as smoothly as it could have. The process of assembling the GRI assignment components was somewhat disorganized and burdensome for staff in the Special Collections and Archives unit.

Students involved in the project increased their information literacy skills most dramatically when they attended face-to-face instruction sessions in Special Collections and Archives before engaging with the GRI tool. While the authors did not intend the tool to replace in-person instruction, it is clear that meeting and interacting with students in person was critical to student success throughout the project. Future studies regarding primary source learning should include instruments and control groups designed to reveal nuanced differences in learning between the GRI tool and in-person instruction. Future development should focus on three key areas: (1) assignment assembly, (2) freshmen tutorials, and (3) integrated assessment.

## Note

1. Scalar is a project of the Alliance for Networking Visual Culture created through strategic partnerships across multiple institutions with support from the Andrew M. Mellon Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities. For more information regarding Scalar, see <http://scalar.usc.edu/>.

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