

## **Discovery through Cultural Memory: undergraduates in the Archives**

**Lisa Sherlock**

Head, Reader Services, Victoria University Library (in the University of Toronto)

**Abstract:** In the past few years, university libraries across North America have begun taking steps to introduce undergraduates to archival research. At the E.J. Pratt Library at Victoria University (in the University of Toronto), staff assists students in the VIC184 Cultural Memory Project, a course assignment that requires students in the first year of university to work with a collection of archival papers towards producing an oral report and a final paper at the end of the academic term. The learning outcomes in this process allow for the transformation of the undergraduate from a receptor of secondary sources to a “knowledge creator”: Students in VIC184 rely on primary source documents in the archives to form their ideas of the person who they have selected to research. Library staff plays a fully active role in the course from providing instruction in accessing and using archival materials and learning along with the students about the individuals whose lives are explored.

**Keywords:** Archives, Libraries, Cultural Memory, Undergraduates, Primary Sources

### **1. Introduction**

While often initially daunting to undergraduates, ultimately, the experience of using an archival collection containing handwritten letters, diaries and photographs can be an exciting and transformative one for a first-year student. The Reader Services Department at the E.J. Pratt Library has played a role in this process of discovery by taking part in the undergraduate seminar course VIC184 since the spring term of 2008. *VIC184: Individuals and the Public Sphere: Cultural Memory* introduces first year students at Victoria College in the University of Toronto, to using primary sources housed in various libraries and archives both on campus and in the city of Toronto while working closely with archivists and library staff for assistance. While the idea of bringing together undergraduates and archives is not a new one –examples can be found in both the library and educational literature that detail other collaborations between archives and faculty for the purpose of integrating undergraduate

assignments with primary source research—there are few examples where an undergraduate course centres its learning on what the students have discovered in the process of using an archival collection. Further, the course contributes to the development of what educational theorist William Perry identifies as “internal authority”. Perry (1970). As a result of having to rely heavily on the material within an archival collection and without the support of secondary source documents, students must draw their own conclusions about the life of the person whose papers they have selected to work with. In activating meaning from archives, they become what Bryan Bance refers to as “knowledge creators”. Bance (2012)

## 2. Literature Review

The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) has recently published a collection of papers which showcases examples of academic libraries collaborations with faculty to introduce undergraduates to the rare books, manuscripts and artefacts housed within their collections. *Past or Portal: Enhancing Undergraduate Learning through Special Collections and Archives* provides nearly fifty case studies drawn from existing programs and courses created to engage students at the undergraduate level through course assignments tied to the use of Special Collections materials. ACRL (2012) And while the ACRL publication records experiences in libraries and archives in the United States, a Canadian example exists through the work of Bryan Bance. In his recent Masters dissertation written at the University of Winnipeg, Bance explores the benefits of the educational role of archivists and archives through outreach in order to enhance the teaching role of university archives. Bance (2012) Similar in some respects to the VIC184 cultural memory archives assignment is the Library/Faculty collaboration in a quarter-long assignment given in an undergraduate history course at DePaul University, which is described in a 2010 article by Michelle McCoy at DePaul University Special Collections and Archives. The collaboration at DePaul began when History Professor Warren Schultz approached the University Library’s Special Collections department, looking for a structured project so that first-time archive users could be effectively guided through the principles and methods of historical research while actually using original materials in the archive. McCoy (2010) The China Missions Project at DePaul University requires first year students to do research using an archive of documents -- principally correspondence --relating to missions in China. Both the history course at DePaul University and the VIC184 course look at archival documents as the source of questions to be answered. More recently, Elaine Carey and Raymond Pun outlined collaboration between St. John’s University and the New York Public Library on a project that required history students to attend an orientation session at the NYPL in order to assist the students in preparing an original research paper based on primary evidence Carey and Pun (2012). And English professor Carol Senf brings her Victorian Studies class to the archives at her university in order to encourage students to move beyond using sources that have been already “digested by professional scholars, writers and historians” for

their research. Senf (2005) Implicitly, the students must rely on their own interpretations of a primary source document where no other analysis exists.

### **3. Background to the Vic184 Experience**

VIC184 is part of VIC One, a first year program strongly centred on small-group learning which serves to enrich the first-year experience and engender a sense of community within an otherwise large and impersonal university. Students apply for admission to VIC One, choosing one stream from five that are offered. The criterion for eligibility includes strong academic and extracurricular performance. The five VIC One streams focus on humanities, the arts, education, political science and the life sciences. Enrollment in the VIC One program is limited to 200 students and a maximum of 25 students per course.

Professor Anne Urbancic had been teaching VIC184 in conjunction with staff at the Victoria University/United Church Archives for a few years prior to the separation of the linked repositories and the move of the United Church Archives to another part of the city. Professor Urbancic then approached the Reader Services department of the E.J. Pratt Library to step in and work with the students taking VIC184 by providing access to archival material at that facility, and having an instructional librarian give two in-class orientation sessions for the students: The first, a general library research session and a second class specifically on archives, what they are, the rules for using the materials within them, and how to access archival material through the use of finding aids.

The aims of the course are manifold. A package of readings comprised of theorists whose work deals with cultural, collective and counter memory is assigned to the students with the intention that they become familiar with the ideas of these historiographers and, through their writings, recognize elements of their theories that can be applied to the discoveries made during archival research. Through the library, the students are introduced to the concept and function of archives and to the prerequisites necessary for accessing the archival collections through using finding aids. The students are given experience in archival research and inherent to this, to the challenges posed by primary source documents. In the final assignment, the students are required to demonstrate the critical thinking skills necessary for making sense of the materials they have worked with over the term.

### **4. Course Requirements**

In order to meet part of the course requirements and complete the assignments, the students are required to create an archival portfolio and to learn how to use and interpret primary sources in order to produce the ‘story’ of their chosen subject. Urbancic (2012) They begin by selecting an archival collection pertaining to an individual or event that is held by a library or archive on the University of Toronto campus or an archive within the city. If there are papers,

diaries or letters held within a student's own family, this collection can be used for the assignments provided that the person who created the materials is deceased. Indeed, in order to avoid any ethical dilemmas involved with disclosing private or potentially harmful information, students must clear their selected archival collection with Professor Urbancic before proceeding with their research.

For the most part, students are given agency by being able to select an archival collection that is meaningful to them. Often they will choose collections pertaining to individuals with whom they have something in common, or to a subject that is of interest to them. As a result, the students are often able to relate their own experiences or knowledge and bring it to bear on the information they find within the archive. Oftentimes, they express a connection to the individual whose papers they have worked with during the term and a reluctance at having to relinquish their work with the archival papers, thereby leaving the person they have come to know so well behind, upon completion of the course.

### **5. The Library as Archive**

E.J. Pratt does not always operate consistently with protocols in effect in other archives. The Pratt Library is primarily an undergraduate library, circulating books and other materials to serve the students, staff and faculty at Victoria University and the University of Toronto. The library is part of Victoria University, a degree granting institution within the University of Toronto and a federated college for undergraduates within the larger university. E.J. Pratt Library also houses Special Collections comprised of rare book collections and archival material that fall mainly within the humanities and social sciences. Archival collections include diaries and notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the papers of literary critic and Victoria University Professor Northrop Frye, the G.E. Bentley William Blake Archive and the archive of Canadian film director Norman Jewison. In addition to these, Pratt Library houses over 70 archival collections relating to individuals or organizations who have a connection to the college or because their papers pertain to another Special Collection held at the library. Students in VIC184 are directed towards using collections of individuals or events that have not been written extensively about before, particularly in published form, in order to encourage them to draw their own conclusions about the subject they have chosen.

### **6. Undergraduates Use of Archives**

Matthew Reynolds and Dale Sauter write that "Special collections and archives in college libraries have long been intimidating to undergraduates. They are seen by many as the domain of expert researchers seeking knowledge of arcane subjects, poring over dusty tomes in the furthest reaches of the library." Reynolds and Sauter (2008) The challenges faced by undergraduates using archival material for the first time are typical of any researcher. The entry point into the archive, the finding aid, is a neutral tool that does not promote the contents of any one file over another, thereby making it a challenge for the students to identify where the interesting stuff is until they actually start

working with the documents themselves. Once one begins working with an archive, other challenges present themselves: Handwriting may be difficult to read, employ words that have fallen out of use or whose meaning may be unclear; relationships may not always be defined; photographs do not always identify all the subjects or are undated. Since secondary sources are often unavailable, students may find they reach only dead ends and have more questions than answers. Fragile and heavily used documents are, in some cases, available on microfilm and researchers are guided to use that less-pleasing format over the original. Collections can be large, in some instances extending to twenty boxes or more, which makes it necessary for some students to focus his research on a particular facet of an individual's life. And as with all lives, some are simply more interesting and event-filled than others. Students may claim that they have selected a dull person to research and must then try and make the most of what information is available to them through the extant documents left by the individual.

One of the by-products of research of this nature, as identified by English professor Carol Senfis, using archival sources “can dramatically reduce plagiarism since their individual nature means that secondary sources that define and analyze a particular document are less likely to exist”. Senf (2005) It is a frustration frequently expressed by VIC184 students that they often cannot locate secondary sources to provide details on relationships or events that are referred to fleetingly in letters or diaries in archival papers. Unless a later reference appears or they can place their individual within a larger historical context which fleshes out the experiences of the individual who is being researched, many elements of a life can remain a mystery. As a result the student must fall back upon their own critical resources, making inferences and leaps of logic through their reliance on only the matter contained within an archive.

Further, the result of student's reliance on their own reading and interpretations of the primary material within an archive leads to what educational theorist William Perry refers to as “cognitive development through internal authority”. Perry (1970) While high school students and undergraduates rely mainly on pre-digested secondary sources in the form of textbooks and knowledge is acquired as a result of external authority, undergraduates using primary source documents must draw their own conclusions if there are no supporting secondary sources to elucidate a life. And this was demonstrated by many VIC184 students in their class presentations and in their final papers. The following comment is one that appeared in a recent paper by a VIC184 student who worked with the papers of a nineteenth century Canadian aboriginal:

*The handwriting itself, as is the case for most of the handwritten material, was of various degrees of legibility from intelligible to indecipherable but mostly the latter. It appears as if sometimes he wrote slowly and deliberately while most other times he scribbled in hurried fashion. Thus I relied heavily on the*

*transcribed documents to substantiate my textual interpretation. For contextual purposes, I turned to secondary historic research but only after completing my primary archival examination in order to prevent my analysis from being unduly influenced by other scholars. This ensured that despite any preliminary biases, I could faithfully reconstruct the character of Peter Jones based on his own documentation and of those who knew him.*P'ng (2012)

### **7. The Assignment**

The students in the VIC184 course are asked a number of questions as they read through the personal papers, diaries and letters of the person whose archival holdings they have selected to research: What kind of archival material is contained in the collection; who was it written by and was it intended for the public or was it clearly intended to be private?; when was it written and where? The students are asked to comment on the condition of the paper and the format, for example, whether it comes from a notebook or loose-leaf sheets, and to remark upon the ink and writing instrument used, if the writer had a tendency to cross out their writing or doodle in the margins of the paper, whether the writing is legible or otherwise. Other questions the students are asked to consider is the tone of the writing, if the manner of the writing is personal and employs code words or euphemisms or is impersonal or business-like. If historical events are mentioned, the students are asked to describe and contextualize their documents within those events. Finally the VIC184 students are asked to document the questions that occurred to them while they worked their way through the archival documents, the difficulties they encountered and the questions that remain unanswered. Urbancic (2012)

The challenges the students' experience are often expressed anecdotally during exchanges at the reference research desk as they work through file folders and in a five minute oral presentation on their archival work that is part of the course requirement. The difficulty identified most frequently by the students is reading the sometimes difficult script of those whose archives are principally comprised of handwritten documents. In an effort to conserve paper, one particular nineteenth century missionary and diarist, used his daughter's school notebook and wrote vertically between her horizontal writing and the resulting text is difficult to read, its meaning painstakingly earned. Some collections are less varied in content and almost wholly comprised of letters, apparently frustrating one student who selected such a collection and would mutter "more letters" as he returned each file to the desk in order to obtain the next one. Some collections yield intriguing storylines such as the letters of Canadian artist Yvonne Housser whose letters detail an affair with a married lover who later becomes her husband while another student pored over diaries of the wife of a well-known literary critic who duly (and dully according to the student's interpretation of the material) records what she ate each day.

Yet, the results, perhaps because they are so hard-won, are gratifying to the students, as evidenced by the enthusiasm often displayed in their oral

presentations, which library staff are invited to attend in the last two weeks of the course. VIC184 students have come to know the individuals whose papers they have worked with over the term in such a way that they become experts in the life they have examined. They exhibit the internal authority described by Perry that comes from relying on their own insights and applying the theories of cultural historians to what they have found, what has been said or in some instances, what has not been disclosed and remains unspoken, negative evidence, which is in itself, also revealing.

The experience of working with the VIC184 students has created learning opportunities on both sides of the desk. Some of the insights that the students share have been surprising to the library staff who may know little about the particulars contained in the archival boxes and the subjects of those letters and diaries, beyond what is contained in the finding aids. I was particularly impressed by a student who worked with an archive of notebooks and travel diaries belonging to a French professor with whom many of the library staff had a passing acquaintance while she lived. In his presentation, the student questioned why there was no personal material and no family references contained in the descriptions of places visited or in the photographs that appeared in the archive. The student learned that the professor had come to Canada as a student from Switzerland to attend Victoria University and continued on to become the first woman to earn a PhD in French language studies in Canada. From the content of her personal papers she apparently had little contact with her family in Europe after her arrival in Canada. She filled her social life with travel, hosted literary salons and formed connections with writers including Samuel Beckett, and others to whom she wrote letters and received replies and whose autographs she pasted into her books. The student hypothesized that the professor, physically distant and possibly estranged from her actual family, created a surrogate family for herself by establishing relationships through her literary and cultural connections. After looking at photographs in university yearbooks, the student speculated further that the professor, who, as a student, appears in group photos, unsmiling, practically austere in appearance in contrast to her peers, may have felt a sense of alienation from them as a foreigner. The student's assessment of the life presented to him through only the contents of the archive elicited critical thinking of the highest quality. The librarians who listened to the presentation were surprised about the insight it provided into a person we thought we knew. The student's research and inquiry into his subject's life emphasized the value of that particular archive as a teaching tool, for it was what wasn't there, and what the student was able to glean from that absence, which provided the opportunity for critical thinking to occur.

### **8. Format as Integral to Analysis**

Undergraduate students who are introduced to rare books by Pablo Alvarez, a Rare books and Special Collections Curator at the University of Rochester, are asked to consider a book's physicality for it can provide the students with new

perspectives to explore specific themes by providing insight into the cultural implications of binding, text, illustrations, illuminations and other hallmarks of book history. Alvarez (2006)The students inVIC184 are asked to think about such questions too. The formats of material within an archive --whether the material the subject used was a notebook or loose leaves—allow students to employ critical thinking skills as well. A student using the papers of the missionary mentioned earlier speculated that his subject used his daughter’s school notebook and made maximum use of the already written-on pages due to the scarcity of paper, an entirely plausible insight given that the missionary was stationed in a remote trading post in northern Canada during the mid-nineteenth century. Another student in remarking upon the brevity with which two distant lovers expressed themselves in letters, accounted for their manner by their mode of their communications: The two were separated by the Atlantic Ocean, one in Europe, one in Canada and their communications were limited to airmail paper and envelopes. A sender would be charged according to the weight of the letter so letters were necessarily brief in order to remain light and inexpensive to send. Students are directed to ask these questions of the materials they are working with in order to ponder the significance of format, thereby fleshing out the individuals they are researching and the conditions during which those people lived.

Students taking the VIC184 course are assessed in three ways. They are required to give a five minute oral presentation which also serves as a progress report and allows them to demonstrate what they had learned about their chosen subject up to that point and reflect upon it, applying this knowledge within the context of the course readings. This class was open to library staff to attend. An essay was submitted to Professor Urbancic as a formal and more complete summary of their individual research. Students are asked to deposit a copy of their paper with the library. Finally, students wrote a final examination in which they were required to reflect upon their own research using archival materials as well as the issues that arose and were articulated during the presentations by their peers.

### **9. Learning Outcomes**

Learning outcomes observed by the librarians were also compared with the major skill sets described in the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) definition of information literacy. The VIC184 archives assignment is structured to produce an information literate person. According to ACRL, the process of becoming someone who is information literate is one that “enables learners to master content and extend their investigations, become more self-directed, and assume greater control over their own learning”. ACRL (2013) In order to achieve success in the course, students in VIC184 need to be able, especially when faced with larger archives, to determine the extent of information needed and access the information efficiently through finding aids. By questioning what they have encountered through primary source documents the students are interacting with it in a critical way. Through thinking about issues like format and modes of communication the students incorporate



information about the past into their knowledge base. The essay format requires them to take the information they have acquired through researching the papers of an individual and focus it in a thesis to be resolved in the course of their paper. The emphasis on selecting an individual who is no longer alive, and through whom potentially damaging information can be disclosed, alerts the students to the ethical issues surrounding the use of information.

### **10. Ethical Issues**

Some of the VIC184 students have inadvertently selected subjects who have presented them with ethical challenges to negotiate. In reading through the papers of a Canadian radio playwright and following up with interviews of individuals well acquainted with her subject, it appeared possible to the student that the subject of her research was homosexual at a time when it was less socially acceptable to go public with such information. The student was faced with the question of whether to disclose this information, thereby “outing” the playwright when he himself did not make his sexual orientation apparent during his lifetime. Other archival collections have presented students with similar questions and dilemmas or raised interest in aspects of lives that the subjects might have preferred to be left unexamined, had they been alive. Without absolute evidence however, the students are often only able to speculate upon some issues, using whatever clues or even negative evidence to substantiate their claims. In concluding her paper, the student who worked with the papers of the radio playwright, reflected that after doing her best “to consider all possibilities and to try to dig deeper” in the process of researching her subject, she had “become more familiar with this extraordinary individual than I ever imagined I would. “I have also come to understand that I can only ever know him to an extent, as I will always have an objective and distanced perspective of his life”.Rewald (2008).

### **11. Future Considerations**

As each term ends, a certain amount of reflection occurs on the part of the librarian who provides the instruction sessions on what improvements are needed in future library sessions for the VIC184 course or if any organizational changes need to occur to facilitate the students’ access to the archival materials. The weaknesses most frequently demonstrated by many students, involve the difficulty in using the finding aids to request the appropriate box and files to begin their work. As a result, a discussion of the finding aid has become the core of the information session on archives. A new slide was introduced to the PowerPoint presentation showing a mass of archival boxes arrayed on shelves with a humorous caption indicating that the student cannot see all the contents of all boxes at once since we continued to receive email requests from a few students to “see” a particular collection with no other indication of which file the student wanted to begin with. We’ve found that the hours that full time staff are available to accept requests for the retrieval of material and to provide access to files has to be re-emphasized both in the in-class session and in individual email replies to students’ inquiries. For the next academic term we

may need to articulate the idea of rarity of original archival documents and the need for them to remain in the library, in a different way, after having one student express the wish to take a file of material home with her.

We do have concerns about the wear and tear that more fragile collections are receiving and the idea of scanning such collections or parts of them is being considered. Making parts of archival collections available digitally would also mean the students could work with the materials at a time more amenable to their own schedules rather than the library's. However, one deterrent to digitization is the loss of that experience of immediacy that many students comment upon, at holding, in some cases, nineteenth century documents in their hands. As Mazella and Grob point out, print facsimiles and digital surrogates may capture the text or illustrations from a book, but they cannot fully express the physical qualities of the original object". Mazella and Grob (2011) We also want the students to continue to have access to the real thing and not a digital surrogate. But we may be able to balance the issue by selectively digitizing more fragile and heavily used items in a collection, in the same way an earlier generation of librarians chose to microfilm such materials, and give the students the opportunity to use digitized materials in some instances and the actual documents in others.

## **12. Conclusion**

In future we are hoping to encourage archivists from within the University of Toronto or those from other city archives to meet with the class along with the librarian from Pratt so students feel welcome at archives outside of those at E.J. Pratt Library. The Records Manager at Victoria University Archives expressed her interest in being involved with the course this year and after attending the orientation session on archives, followed up by supervising a number of students who chose to work with collections located in the archives. Compared to other years, more students proportionally chose to work with collections other than those housed at E.J. Pratt Library this past term. In the early years of the library's involvement, all of the students in the class of 21 students chose to work at Pratt, a challenging occurrence when it happens in terms of co-ordinating retrievals, collection maintenance and managing the traffic at the Reference/Research desk

While the Reader Services staff at Pratt Library would readily admit to releasing a collective sigh when each term draws to a conclusion, being a part of the VIC184 experience is a positive one. The Library staff have learned more about the archival collections we hold through the student's insights and discoveries made by them as expressed in their oral presentations and their final papers. Collections that previously did not often see the light of day are opened to reveal secrets about those we only thought we knew. We understand and appreciate, as a result of comments we hear from the students themselves, that they value the experience of having worked with the collections and are amazed at holding documents from another time in their hands, to ask questions of them

and puzzle through the hand- writing to discern the author’s meaning. At least one past VIC184 student went on to hold a summer position in a regional archive and other students, as we hoped, have returned in their later academic years, to use other archival collections at the E.J. Pratt Library. A published author highly familiar with the contents of one archival collection has cited the work of a VIC184 student when he came across the student’s paper in the collection. Not incidentally, the high use of archival material over two terms each academic year drives our overall library use statistics up. In 2010, Dr. Urbancic won the Primary Source award from the Center for Research Libraries in recognition for her teaching the VIC184 course. The award credited Urbancic for giving her students “the early exposure to rare documents and special collections and instilling in them a strong sense of confidence about doing research, and the self-assurance to seek information in places where undergraduates usually do not tread.” Ultimately, we hope to continue to be involved with this first-year seminar course and perhaps others that follow it, in the years to come, and be part of introducing a new generation of undergraduates to the intellectual value, learning and discovery that comes from doing archival research.

## References

- Alvarez. P., (2006). Introducing Rare Books in the Undergraduate Curriculum, *Rare Books and Manuscripts*, 7, 94-103.
- Association of College and Research Libraries, (2013). *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* <http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/informationliteracycompetency>
- Bance, B., (2012). *Outreach in the Academic Community: enhancing the teaching role of university archives*, University of Winnipeg.
- Carey, E., and Pun, R., (2012). Doing History: a teaching collaboration between St. John’s University and New York Public Library, *College and Research Library News* 73, 138-141.
- Centre for Research Libraries, (2010), Global Resources Network. Focus on Global Resources: 2010 Teaching Awards, 10, <http://www.crl.edu/focus/article/6643>
- Mazella, D., and Grob, J., (2011). Collaborations between Faculty and Special Collections Librarian in Inquiry Driven Classes, *Portal: Libraries and the Academy* 11, 467-487.
- McCoy, M., (2010). The Manuscript as Question: Teaching Primary Sources in the Archives – The China Missions Project, *College and Research Libraries* 71, 49-62.
- Perry, W.G., (1970). *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years: a scheme*. Holt, Rhinehart and Winston, New York.
- P’ng, J., (2012). *Peter Jones (i.e. Kahkewaquonaby) The Man of Two Worlds*, VIC184 Archival Assignment.
- Mitchell, E., Seiden, P., and Taraba.S., eds. (2012). *Past or Portal? Enhancing Undergraduate learning through. Special Collections and Archives*. Association of College and Research Libraries, Chicago.
- Rewald, S., (2008). *Finding John Douglas: an archival experience*, VIC184 Archival Assignment.
- Reynolds, M., and Sauter, D., (2008). Engaging Undergraduates in Special Collections through English. Composition, *College and Research Library News* 69, 318-321.

940 *Lisa Sherlock*

Senf, C., (2005). Using University Archives to Demonstrate Real Research, *Changing English* 12,297-307.

Urbancic, A., (2012). *VIC184: Individuals and the Public Sphere: cultural memory archival portfolio Assignment.*, Victoria University, Toronto.