Archival Educators Roundtable Newsletter

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Welcome

to our third issue of the AER Newsletter!

So much has changed since our winter issue. Our professional settings look different, as do many of our interactions with colleagues and researchers. I have been so inspired by the work of our AER members as they have adjusted their archival education work to the new classroom and reading room landscapes. Developing primary source literacy and being smart consumers of information are more important than ever, as researchers of all ages navigate new methods of research and learning.

The AER is adapting to how professionals are connecting by holding our annual summer meeting as a virtual Roundtable meeting on August 20th. We are excited for this new format, since it will allow our colleagues from greater distances to attend and make their voices heard.

This meeting and issue will be the last with our incredibly talented editor, Elizabeth Berkowitz. Elizabeth joined the RAC as Mellon/ACLS Public Fellow in August 2018 to serve in the role of Outreach Program Manager, and her two-year fellowship appointment is now drawing to a close. She created an impactful and inclusive way to extend our table to more readers with the Newsletter, and will be handing off that role to Janet Bunde, our first guest editor, for the next two issues. I look forward to working with Janet, and to reading more about the inventive and engaging work being done in the field.

- Marissa Vassari, Archivist & Educator, RAC

Hello, Readers!

Since our Winter 2020 AER Newsletter and AER meeting, both the COVID-19 pandemic and the continued quest to combat American racial injustice have caused swift, indelible changes in our institutions, our personal lives, and the world. Into this epoch-defining moment, we at the AER Newsletter continue to insert our little piece of dialogue: the conversation around archival education, and the enduring power of primary sources to open a window into the past and illuminate our present. Teaching and learning through primary sources have never been more relevant. Primary sources remain essential tools to illustrate the implicit power dynamics of record-keeping, the presence of bias and consequent need for critical literacy skills, as well as the empathy fostered through examples of shared humanity.

When Marissa and I first discussed the idea of a newsletter almost two years ago, we envisioned a publication that could expand the robust dialogues characteristic of the Archive Center's biannual Archival Educators Roundtable (AER) meetings, as well as showcase an even wider range of voices and pedagogical practices in archival education. We hoped that the AER Newsletter could become a forum to document the many stripes of primary source advocacy as practiced by archivists, historians, and educators. From the inaugural issue to today's, we have featured classroom teachers, museum educators, archivists, historians, and university educators who each differently increased the breadth and depth of our understanding of archival education as a field. Today, we can only imagine the myriad directions in which the practice of primary source pedagogy will evolve in response to a tumultuous present, and we hope that the AER Newsletter can shift in tandem to explore whatever comes next.

On a personal note, this is my last AER Newsletter issue as your editor, and it has been a true pleasure and honor to have helped this publication develop and grow; I will remain inspired by all of our contributors. I'm excited to see what our incoming guest editor, Janet Bunde, and our fearless AER leader, Marissa Vassari, have in store! So, with that, we turn to the Summer 2020 AER Newsletter. This issue's contributors tackle new iterations of primary source education, looking beyond the textual to the experiential to ultimately redefine the contours of a primary source "teachable moment."

My interview with Mark Carnes, discussing primary sources and "game-playing as pedagogy," began as a personal quest to understand how his university-level "Reacting to the Past" (RTTP) methodology really worked. Over the course of our conversations, I was taken by the way RTTP game-play seamlessly integrates historical evidence, primary source critical reading, and persuasive public speaking skills, and saw opportunities to adapt RTTP techniques to all levels of primary source curricula.

In our "Educator Spotlight," historian and former high school teacher Barry Goldberg speaks to the value of using original audio recordings of historical figures in classroom learning. His practice using aural primary sources demonstrates the importance of student exposure to diverse formats of first-person narration, as well as the psychological connections possible through hearing the words of a historical figure firsthand.

And, last but not least, this issue features an article by Yukie Ohta on the interactive and community-building primary sources of her SoHo Memory Project Mobile Museum. Among their many uses, primary sources paint a portrait of life during a particular era. With the Mobile Museum, Ohta captured the many historical iterations of New York City South of Houston Street through textual, visual, aural, as well as olfactory experiences—moving a step beyond a simple "portrait" to fully immerse visitors within a moment in time.

I hope everyone enjoys and is as inspired as I have been by this issue's collection of articles! I wish everyone a safe and peaceful summer, and a great virtual AER meeting this August!

- Elizabeth Berkowitz
AER Newsletter Editor
Mellon/ACLS Public Fellow and Outreach Program Manager, RAC

Author Yukie Ohta showing current LREI students photos of past LREI students from the archives.

Reacting to the Past: Primary Sources and Game-Play in the Undergraduate Classroom

Edited Interview between Mark Carnes, Professor of History at Barnard College and Executive Director of the Reacting Consortium; and Elizabeth Berkowitz, Mellon/ACLS Public Fellow and Outreach Program Manager at the Rockefeller Archive Center.

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Reacting to the Past
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ROLE-PLAYING GAMES FOR ENGAGED LEARNING.

ENGAGE. IMAGINE. INQUIRE.
WITH REACTING TO THE PAST.

This interview was conducted via Skype on two dates: January 14, 2020 and April 23, 2020. It has been edited for clarity. The conversation reflects the changing world of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Elizabeth Berkowitz: Mark, thank you so much for speaking with me today about Reacting to the Past (RTTP)—I know your insights, and information about RTTP will be invaluable to our AER Newsletter readers!

Some of our audience may not be familiar with RTTP. Could you describe "Reacting to the Past"—what is it, and how does it work?

Mark Carnes: Reacting to the Past consists of complex games, set in the past, in which students take on roles informed by important texts and primary sources. . . democratic Athens in 403 BCE, after its defeat in the Peloponnesian War; the French Revolution in 1791; India in 1945; the struggle between patriots and loyalists in New York during the American revolution, and so on. These are in-class games that unfold over the course of nearly a month. They have nothing to do with computer games.

EB: What types of roles do students take on? Are they primarily main characters in history, or could students be assigned roles of generic, background players representative of an integral historical demographic?

MC: Both types, but students greatly prefer to take on the roles of real people. Game designers often start out with generic figures and then, after lots of research, they base them on historical figures. But to create a game with 40 or more figures—that entails a lot of work. It's one reason why Reacting games sometimes consist of over a half-million words of text.

EB: What is the general structure of an RTTP game, and what do gamebooks typically contain?

MC: The structure is consistent: a couple of classes where the instructor sets up the game; then the game itself, when students run the sessions; and then a final "post-mortem" session or two. The gamebook usually begins with a "You Are There" scene-setting vignette. This is followed by a substantive historical essay, outlining the historical situation going up to the point the game begins. Then the gamebook lists the players and factions, outlines the rules, and provides primary sources and texts that help students in writing papers and giving speeches. In addition to the gamebook, which is published, instructors download roles and an instructor's manual, which are not available publicly.

EB: For educators who haven't yet encountered RTTP, what would be an analogous medium or educational format?

MC: One student told me it was like Model UN "but on steroids." In Minds on Fire: How Role-Immersion Games Transform College, my book on Reacting, I argue that Reacting is structurally analogous to the forms of "subversive play" that have long captured students' attention and imaginations, diverting them from academic pursuits.

A good Reacting game is a form of social competition and imaginative release, where students run the class and assume powerful identities—as Puritan divines, Ming emperors, or Enlightenment scholars. This makes it fun—and, we hope, as addictive as video games and beer pong.

EB: I love the idea of "subversive play"! It seems consistent with the theory that disrupted expectations—in this case, a disruption of traditional or expected university pedagogical formats—have the potential to engender deeper, more meaningful learning experiences.

What inspired the creation of the first Reacting to the Past game?

MC: I had gotten tenure at Columbia; I had finished my term as chair of my department. I was a good teacher and I had superb students. And, yet, I was bored with my classes, as were my students. I hoped to jazz up my "great books" discussion seminar by structuring it as a set of debates. But in a set of debates on the Analects of Confucius, set during the Ming dynasty, two students managed to take control of the class. And when they did—when students perceived that this was THEIR class—the debates acquired a glorious intensity and richness. A student-run class, I realized, was far more powerful than one I supervised. The problem, of course, was that students didn't know the material. So, the challenge was to create a structure in which the content was embedded in the material: if students could be persuaded to inhabit the material, they would learn the content, but in their own, organic and powerful way. This structure became the Reacting to the Past game.

Now that hundreds of other professors have joined the enterprise as game designers and imaginative pedagogues, the concept has advanced enormously.

EB: I want to reflect on your note about the importance of a student-run class to RTTP's origin, and to briefly return to your previous comment, about students "run[ning] the class and assum[ing] powerful identities" in order to have a successful RTTP game. One of the unique aspects of RTTP is just this flip of the classroom power dynamic—students really run the game, with the educator as the supervisor, support, and Gamemaster. How important is this sense of student ownership to the RTTP curricula, and to the strength of the ultimate game? And, with this level of student-led participation and work, how do classroom social dynamics interface or interfere with the game?

MC: Students help run all of our Reacting faculty training workshops. At one workshop, a professor asked of the student panel: "What's the most important thing for us to do as Reacting instructors?" Jessica Howell, a superb student at Eastern Michigan University responded: "You have to give students control of the class. If you can't do that, you shouldn't try Reacting." And she was right. When students run the class, a set of powerful intra-peer group dynamics take charge. And this can be magical. Often, they will try to steer the game in some direction that subverts educational goals; that's why the games have so many rules and such elaborate role sheets. This holds the students to historical plausibility. So there is always tension between brilliant, energetic students and Gamemaster/instructors. But that tension is part of the fun. When a student says: "But given my role, I should have the power to do X and it's not in my role sheet." The instructor/Gamemaster usually responds: "Well, if you provide me with solid evidence based on good research, maybe I will amend your role sheet to provide that power." And often students will do lots of research. In fact, this is one way the Reacting games have acquired depth and sophistication—thousands of students finding new things out about their roles. A single role "sheet" sometimes consists of 8,000 words!

EB: I love how this dynamic sets the stage both for student social development, creating a tight-knit community among participants, and also fosters such a sense of personal responsibility to one's character, such that student self-directed character research ends up enriching the game overall. I imagine, too, that, as you say, the faculty or educators who run an RTTP game are a self-selected group of individuals—educators who are comfortable ceding the reigns to their class.

MC: As an instructor, I like to lead and even control a class. Philosophically, I was always skeptical of group projects and the like. But I've found that I love it when I'm sitting in the back of the room and students are themselves debating important texts and ideas and bringing the past alive. I still retain some measure of control—by nudging students to look at this text or consider that rule. And I grade their written work and class performances. But to be an essentially "behind-the-scenes" part of a vibrant and powerful learning experience is glorious. Reacting faculty are usually among the most creative and venturesome folk at their institutions. Many of them are senior professors, like me, who have longed to work with students who have developed a consuming interest in the material. And many are younger scholars who have had doubts about lecturing.

EB: How important are primary sources to any RTTP game? How would you describe their function within game play? Are primary sources used as support for a main written narrative that sets the scene—i.e., adding a bit of "period-specific color" to a story—or are they an integral world-building apparatus for players, requiring close analysis and engagement?

MC: Students win the game by persuading other student-players that "their" position makes the most sense. But students are probably arguing things that they don't believe. They rely on powerful texts to supply the information and arguments. Their speeches are drawn from those materials, as are their papers. That's one of the satisfying aspects of teaching with Reacting. Students NEED the primary sources desperately, to make their papers and speeches effective and powerful. Often students do independent research to find more primary sources to support their arguments. (And, again, these sources often find their way into future versions of the games).

EB: You had mentioned in a previous conversation that many students initially have difficulty learning how to engage with the primary sources, leading to consequent difficulty fully inhabiting their roles and succeeding in the games. What strategies have RTTP instructors found most useful to guide students through a primary source text?

MC: Some of the materials are difficult, usually because the ideas are expressed in a language and context that are unfamiliar to students. I don't think we've found a single template to guide students through primary sources. And many instructors now contend that games that once were accessible are no longer accessible. They say that we need to do more to help students through those texts. I think they may be right. This may be especially true for faculty teaching at community colleges. In any case, the growing consensus is that we need to do more to guide students through those sources. I don't think we've yet identified the best solution to this challenge. Perhaps your AER specialists can figure this out for us!

EB: I think we are trying to address this question in varying ways, for sure! Do you think that part of student difficulty working with primary sources stems from a lack of sufficient groundwork in how to read and glean information from a historical primary source? The idea that primary source literacy was not necessarily a component of a university student's previous high school, middle school, or elementary school training?

It seems as though, between world-immersive video games or other role-playing games, that the concept of a RTTP game would be familiar to 21st-century student populations, suggesting that the sticking point—difficulty learning how to deal with or read a game's required primary sources—then reflects more of a systemic learning gap in a student's education.

MC: Yes, I think this is true. But I also know that when you try to "teach" such skills in the abstract, students glaze over. So, I have doubts about whether it makes sense to provide abstract instruction on such matters. Students pay attention when they NEED the information. And some ideas are emerging. Last year, for example, the Reacting Consortium decided to offer an annual cash prize—the Brilliancy Prize—for the best new idea in the Reacting world. And we awarded our first prize to an historian AND a librarian at Carleton University in Ontario, because they came up with the idea of creating a role for a research librarian WITHIN the game [Greenwich Village, 1913: Suffrage, Labor, and the New Woman] itself. The librarian then interacted with students as a game player, helping them with research needs and primary sources. This idea is now being advanced as "revolutionary" within the library science community.

EB: I love this idea! It cements the importance of research skills to RTTP game play, and similarly helps students better identify professionals who can support their research (and, it should be noted, underscores, as a researcher, the necessity of a good and productive relationship with your research librarian or archivist!).

MC: It was truly brilliant. My guess is that all of the Reacting game designers are going to have to figure out how to add such roles.

EB: Can you tell us about the Reacting Consortium? What is it, how did it come about, and what is the value of the Consortium to RTTP gaming?

MC: Reacting spread by word of mouth, from one professor to another. And as one instructor used it at a particular school, others joined her, until usually a small group of enthusiasts emerged at scores—and then hundreds—of colleges. When exposed to this new way of teaching, nearly everyone had ideas on how to make it work better—as the librarian from Carleton showed.

We began to create institutions to support, expand, and disseminate the idea: an editorial board, to supervise game development; a publications committee to create satisfactory relationships with publishers of the games; and ultimately we created the Reacting Consortium, Inc., a not-for-profit organization, hosted by Barnard College, that supervises the development and dissemination of the concept. We rely on revenues from institutional and individual members to survive administratively. The Board of the Reacting Consortium consists of about a dozen administrators and faculty members, and two student alums. It does a tremendous amount of volunteer work. [Some of the resources available to RTTP instructors via the Consortium include a Reacting Faculty Facebook Lounge, a Reacting Consortium Library, and the BLORG—the "Big List of Reacting Games" published and in progress.]

The rest of the conversation occurred on April 23, 2020.

EB: Mark, since we last corresponded, the world has changed dramatically, and we are now in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. You had mentioned that RTTP had switched to an online format. How is that going, and how does that work? It seems as though RTTP is an experience that thrives off of interpersonal connections, and might be incompatible with the restrictions of social distancing, etc.

MC: For about three years, a group of about a dozen Reacting faculty have been exploring doing Reacting online. I was skeptical, as were most Reacting faculty, for exactly the reason you cite. Reacting is deeply interpersonal: in fact, many of us imagined that the appeal of attending a Reacting class was one way that Reacting would help bricks-and-mortar colleges survive the online onslaught. But when COVID-19 sent everyone home—and online—nearly all Reacting faculty instantly had to adapt to the online format, myself included.

My Reacting class has managed surprisingly well, although partly that may have been because they were together during the first half of the semester and forged some strong interpersonal bonds. But, yesterday, I had a Reacting class and 15 of 17 students logged in, including one student who was at a quarantine hotel in Beijing (at 3:40 in the morning!), another on the outskirts of Hanoi, another in Dubai, another in Chile, and another in Australia (at 4:40 in the morning). They had a strong discussion-debate. (We also had three professors from other colleges join the class, because they're trying to learn how to run that game online.) It was weird, but it worked quite well. I have to say, I'm a bit surprised.

EB: Did you have to build a new digital platform to host the games, or, for now, are faculty with games in progress simply using the tools provided by their university?

MC: Columbia University instantly installed Zoom on all instructors' Canvas software [Canvas is the learning management software used by Columbia University]. They did it in two days. The Reacting community has been exploring multiple options, including Slack. This summer, we will be running workshops on how to teach Reacting online in multiple software formats. Interested instructors should visit the Reacting website.

Also, the Reacting community has been finding ways to integrate other elements, such as online die rolls, historically appropriate backgrounds, etc., etc.

EB: That's great! So, the pandemic provided a crash-course opportunity to figure out how RTTP could be successful in a virtual environment—

MC: Yup. I also like to assign roles randomly—and publicly—and I found an online app to do that.

EB: Are there any plans to centralize the technology—as if a virtual iteration of the gamebooks—by creating a custom online platform aligned to the needs of an RTTP game? Or would the idea of online RTTP revolve around Gamemasters choosing from among a list of apps and digital tools that have proven successful for virtual play?

MC: In a pinch, W. W. Norton, publisher of most Reacting games, made e-books available to beleaguered Reacting faculty on an emergency basis. But, going forward, we're still trying to figure things out. The summer will be a time of multiple discussions and experiments.

EB: That's great! What are you concerned might be lost along the way with RTTP in a digital format? Which skills typically acquired during game-play do you think might be most at risk in a digital format? Or is this all a question of degrees—some skills less sharpened, but others, unexpectedly, becoming stronger when virtual?

MC: In class, students learn how to make connections, how to read subtle clues from their peers—disinterest, disapproval, excitement—and respond to them. They learn that making an argument is not just about advancing ideas and evidence, but about connecting with other people. When they were all in the same room, they knew when they were making connections, and when their peers were tuning off. In a synchronous digital classroom, like Zoom, you get some sense of it. But it is greatly diminished. Comedians, accustomed to life audiences, have best perceived how difficult it is to connect with a virtual audience.

EB: Absolutely. As all of us are finding out quite quickly, digital communication can "connect" us, literally, but much of what makes connection meaningful is ultimately lost—

EB: Shifting gears a bit: RTTP was granted funding to develop STEM-related RTTP games. Could you describe the thought process behind this initiative? How do STEM RTTP games work? What topics do they cover, and what have been the most significant challenges in developing and popularizing STEM RTTP games?

MC: Fairly early in the Reacting enterprise, I wondered whether we could play games on the history of science. It seemed impossible to have a Copernicus or Galileo game, because no student could make a persuasive argument that the earth stands fixed, without motion, at the center of the universe. But, in 2003, I joined the team that was designing the Galileo game—our first STEM game—and I realized the elegant brilliance of Aristotle's argument on that point. The opponents to Copernicus/Galileo had an easy time, simply internalizing Aristotle's ingenious arguments and then advancing them, and the supporters of Copernicus/Galileo had a very hard time proving Aristotle was wrong. The game was a wonderful intellectual collision. The point is that most

Click above to watch *Reacting to the Past: The Student Perspective (2012)*

scientific paradigms—even those that are flawed or downright wrong—have a fascinating chain of evidence and deduction to support them. Reacting games display those intellectual collisions.

MC: As for your other questions [about STEM RTTP Games]: all Reacting games are set in the past, and we have, for example, debates on whether the Royal Society of London should award its most prestigious medal to Charles Darwin's 1859 On the Origin of Species: was it truly science, based on inductive evidence, or was it merely brilliant speculation, based on deduction? Other STEM RTTP games include: the 2009 UN debate on climate change; the 1850s London cholera epidemic; and obesity and cholesterol and the American diet in the 1990s.

I'm now working on a game with a brilliant Columbia graduate, Jamie Lerner-Brecher, on whether the Royal Society in the seventeenth century should embrace the mathematical insights related to infinitesimals (as John Wallis proposed) or oppose them as absurdist fantasies (as Thomas Hobbes insisted—yes, THAT Thomas Hobbes: To Hobbes, mathematical chimeras = dangerous instability). Wallis won, advancing the study of calculus.

The climate change game, I suspect, will eventually be taught everywhere. That hasn't happened yet, but it was only published two years ago. And, eventually—perhaps soon—there will surely be a COVID-19 game.

EB: I hope there will be a COVID-19 game! Perhaps dovetailing with a public health department. These STEM games all sound fascinating, and wonderful opportunities for students to see the humanities work—the rhetoric, persuasive strategies, etc.—behind every important scientific discovery or intellectual shift.

Which departments have been game to take up these STEM RTTP games? Have you seen faculty in hard sciences—rather than in the history of science or pure history fields—use them? And what types of primary sources are typically used in the sciences games? Do students engage with laboratory data, as well as with printed texts or articles?

MC: We have a whole cohort of science faculty developing these games, though mostly they are used in general education courses, or so it seems to me. I'm not sure of this. As far as sources: the Galileo game includes major texts—Aristotle and Galileo—but it also includes labs on optics and stellar parallax. The game on climate change includes lots of data and tables on CO2 emissions, etc. The game on obesity/cholesterol includes the actual studies, cited by proponents and scientists, which happened to be incomplete and even wrong: Congress had to act, but their scientific information wasn't perfect. (Analogous to climate change studies today.)

MC: In general, college administrators, almost without exception, love Reacting—even when they don't really understand it. That's because for decades they have attended professional conferences where they learn that students aren't learning much because passive pedagogical modes are ineffective; but the same conferences tell them that its dangerous to "lead from above." So, when a Reacting instructor appears on their campus and seeks support, the administrator thinks: "At last, someone is eager to explore active learning. I should support this." And he/she does.

EB: That's wonderful A few last questions before we wrap up: where do you see RTTP going in the future? Or how do you hope RTTP will evolve? From its humble beginnings as your classroom experiment to a national pedagogical movement, much has already significantly changed.

MC: As far as RTTP's evolution: back in the late 1990s, when I first began developing five games, I was just trying to create a classroom experience that stimulated me and my students. As it began to spread, I found it all intriguing—but also baffling. Soon dozens, then scores, and eventually hundreds of venturesome and iconoclastic professors were advancing all sorts of ideas [about Reacting]. Generally speaking, we encouraged exploration of everything. Those whose ingenuity was matched by diligence and direction ending up carrying Reacting into entirely new realms. I think of it this way: back in 1996, when I was bored with the traditional teaching modes, I spotted a doorway. Without knowing what I was doing, I opened the door and everything was black. I had a flashlight, and I illuminated a little space. Then others came through the door. They had flashlights, too, and they walked in different directions. Soon we realized that this new space was unfathomably immense. These people took the program to places I could never have anticipated or imagined. So, what will the future bring? I haven't the foggiest idea. But it will be fascinating and, I trust, a lot of fun. You and your colleagues in archival materials have come to me, flashlight in hand. What you will find and develop, I don't know: but I bet it will be wonderful.

EB: Of that, I have absolutely no doubt!

MC: Will Reacting itself evolve into The Future? That seems unlikely, if only because the instructors and administrators who are promoting Reacting are not much interested in institution-building and money-making. But I do think that Reacting will generate many of the creative ideas that will become a major component of the future of higher education.

EB: And, finally: RTTP is geared to the university community. But some of the skills endemic to a successful RTTP experience—namely, increased primary source literacy and the deployment of these skills in a practical way through writing and argument—could have application across learning levels. Do you have any recommendations for how some of these skills or the tenets of the RTTP immersive learning environment could translate to high school, middle school, or even elementary school classrooms?

MC: As far as K-12: we get hundreds of queries a year. We lack the administrative structure to adequately support the 4,000 or so college instructors who play Reacting games. We probably could get grants to support K-12, but that would require a massive increase in our institutional structure and, as I say, our team is not big on empire-building or institution-building. We like to explore ideas about teaching and learning, and our team is exploring this further.

EB: Understandable. Perhaps, rephrasing my question a bit: what would you recommend to K-12 educators who are interested in using the RTTP format or principles in their classroom?

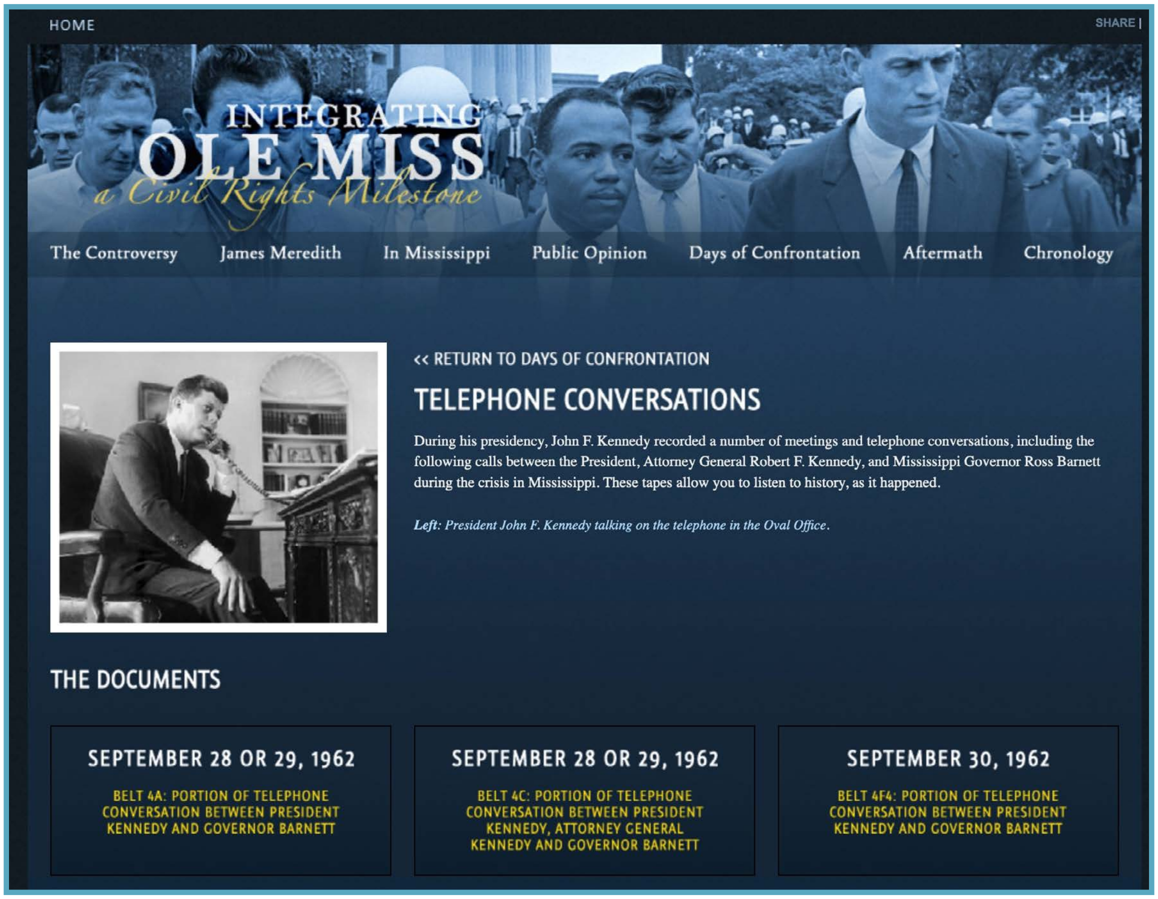
MC: Reacting generates powerful motivational responses among most college students, or so it seems. That is a major accomplishment. Are these modes TOO powerful for younger students? Is the traditional K-12 classroom conducive to this experience? We need serious studies before going in this direction, or so it seems to me.

But I can say this: philosophers of education have long insisted that students best learn through play. That is true. But then Plato, Rousseau, Dewey, Erikson, and others define play in ways that ensure that play won't be fun. Specifically, they discourage role-playing and unchained imagination, lest it lead in dangerous directions. I argue that education should embrace play, and play should/must be fun. And it's fun to imagine you are someone else—especially someone with special powers (like superheroes, but also like statesmen, or Puritan divines, or scientists in the Royal Society). And it is fun to inhabit liminal worlds where the usual conventions are turned upside down: where students run the class, where students take on strange roles and identify with unusual thoughts. All educators should not only endorse active-learning strategies, but should also find ways to make them fun. And I encourage them to think hard about that which is irrational: fun. Fun is de-stabilizing and partially unscripted, which makes it difficult to harness to learning plans. But without fun, a teacher's plans won't generate much learning.

EB: Beautifully stated. Thank you, Mark, and thank you for taking the time to "speak" with me.

MC: Thanks so much! I've enjoyed this. Be well and safe!

Educator Spotlight: Teaching U.S. Presidential History Through Primary Sources



<< RETURN TO DAYS OF CONFRONTATION

TELEPHONE CONVERSATIONS

During his presidency, John F. Kennedy recorded a number of meetings and telephone conversations, including the following calls between the President, Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, and Mississippi Governor Ross Barnett during the crisis in Mississippi. These tapes allow you to listen to history, as it happened.

Left: *President John F. Kennedy talking on the telephone in the Oval Office.*

THE DOCUMENTS

SEPTEMBER 28 OR 29, 1962
BELT 4A: PORTION OF TELEPHONE CONVERSATION BETWEEN PRESIDENT KENNEDY AND GOVERNOR BARNETT

SEPTEMBER 28 OR 29, 1962
BELT 4C: PORTION OF TELEPHONE CONVERSATION BETWEEN PRESIDENT KENNEDY, ATTORNEY GENERAL KENNEDY AND GOVERNOR BARNETT

SEPTEMBER 30, 1962
BELT 4F4: PORTION OF TELEPHONE CONVERSATION BETWEEN PRESIDENT KENNEDY AND GOVERNOR BARNETT

Phone calls from 1962 between Kennedy and Mississippi Governor Ross Barnett about integrating Ole Miss.

Barry Goldberg, Research Fellow, Rockefeller Archive Center

A version of this article was first published in Teaching United States History in 2016.

Teaching with primary sources is a high-risk, high-reward endeavor. They provide a first-hand view of historical figures, processes, and ideas that allow for critical thinking, discussion, and skill-building. They also help teachers show students the interpretive aspects of historical analysis, demonstrating that history is far more than a collection of names, dates, and facts. Indeed, some of my most memorable moments teaching U.S. history (whether at the high school or college level) have involved primary sources – watching students spend entire class sessions comparing drafts of the Declaration of Independence, breaking down Lincoln's first inaugural address, or examining a 1944 letter from an African American soldier to Franklin D. Roosevelt, for example.

And yet, primary sources can be complicated teaching tools. Analyzing them takes time and requires strong background knowledge. Many also include difficult, antiquated language that can frustrate and confuse students. To address this challenge, I always made sure my students, regardless of academic level, were analyzing both textual and non-textual sources, including photography, political cartoons, music lyrics, and film clips.

One of the most valuable types of non-textual sources I employed in the classroom were recordings of presidential meetings and phone calls. From 1940-1973, six different presidents recorded their conversations with White House Staff, journalists, congresspeople, local and state officials, and other leading political figures, providing scholars with a goldmine of new data with which to examine the history of American politics. The practice began in 1940 when President Roosevelt, frustrated at being misquoted by the media, began recording a small number of his press conferences and private conversations. It then expanded in the 1960s, when President Kennedy installed a full White House taping system to preserve material for his memoirs. President Johnson, wanting to save an accurate record of his work and political engagements, taped more than 800 hours of conversations – including about 650 on the phone. After a brief pause, Richard Nixon eventually recorded about 3,400 hours of meetings and phone calls as well.

These clips hold immense value for classroom teachers and archival educators. While they require some background knowledge, presidential recordings allow students to see how historical events unfold in real time, make elite political figures complex, dynamic, and relatable, and provide a behind-the-scenes glimpse of unscripted presidential decision-making. On a broader level, these recordings also illustrate larger historical arguments, show how government works, and raise more abstract questions about primary sources and historical methodology.

For these reasons, presidential recordings became an integral part of my history curricula as a teacher. Take a unit on the civil rights movement, for example. A lesson on the origins of the movement featured a conversation between President Roosevelt and A. Philip Randolph, a noted union activist whose March on Washington Movement pressured the president to issue an executive order banning racial discrimination in certain World War II defense industries. As they listened to the call, my students noted how Roosevelt's tone – initially defensive and frustrated –shifted to become more conversational and supportive by the end of the conversation. As such, the call helped me establish one of the unit's main themes using a memorable example: the relationship(s) between formal policymaking and grassroots activism in furthering social change.

Later in the unit, I built one lesson around several phone calls between John F. Kennedy and Mississippi Governor Ross Barnett about integrating the University of Mississippi. I can still hear my students' frustration at Kennedy not demanding the governor integrate sooner and marvel at hearing his language become more assertive and less conciliatory by the end of the series of calls. Here was a first-hand view of the most powerful person in office having a very human and relatable moment: changing his mind, grappling with and adjusting to new realities, and getting frustrated with injustice.

My following lesson built upon these activities, utilizing a set of calls between President Lyndon Johnson and Georgia Governor Carl Sanders regarding the president's plan to seat two members of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, a new civil rights group, at the 1964 Democratic National Convention. After reading about Johnson's public defense of the plan, my students were struck by Johnson's private anger at not doing more, highlighted by the colorful language he used in a fairly heated call with Sanders. The call became a springboard for a larger class discussion around several questions: Do presidents have the power to shape larger social movements? How did Johnson's political management style differ from those of his predecessors? And how might his public strategy have changed the course of history (if at all)?

The unit ended with another recording, this time of President Nixon criticizing the hit TV show All in the Family for celebrating hippies and presenting the show's (more traditional) protagonist, Archie Bunker, in a negative light. Played at the beginning of class, this recording becomes a hook into a lesson on the 1968 presidential election and the broader culture wars of the period.

In all, these recordings allowed students to travel back in time and learn about historical events from a unique, first-hand perspective. These sources also offer several other pedagogical advantages:

- They are adaptable for multiple grades. As audio recordings of various lengths on various topics, they are suitable for middle school, high school, undergraduate, and advanced graduate students.

- They engage students with different literacy levels and learning styles. The recordings engage students who struggle with reading and are auditory learners. Many of the recordings also come with scrolling transcripts that can be paused and analyzed.

- They make presidents more accessible. Presidential history can sometimes have a dry policy focus involving static (typically white male) figures. Listening to presidents make decisions in real time makes them more dynamic and complex.

- They show the interplay between government and grassroots actors. Hearing presidents converse with ordinary people and social activists adds diversity to presidential history, and illustrates the interplay between ground-up and top-down politics.

- They come in handy during election season. With a presidential election around the corner, students will be particularly interested in presidential politics. The recordings offer a new way to capitalize on this opportunity and link history to current events.

- They are interdisciplinary. The recordings cover almost any topic related to foreign and domestic policy, from military strategy and international diplomacy, to public health and education policy, to the environment and the space race.

I have found the websites below most useful in discovering presidential recordings. While this is not an exhaustive list, it may provide teachers, archivists, and archival educators with some useful curricular resources that engage students in primary sources in new ways.

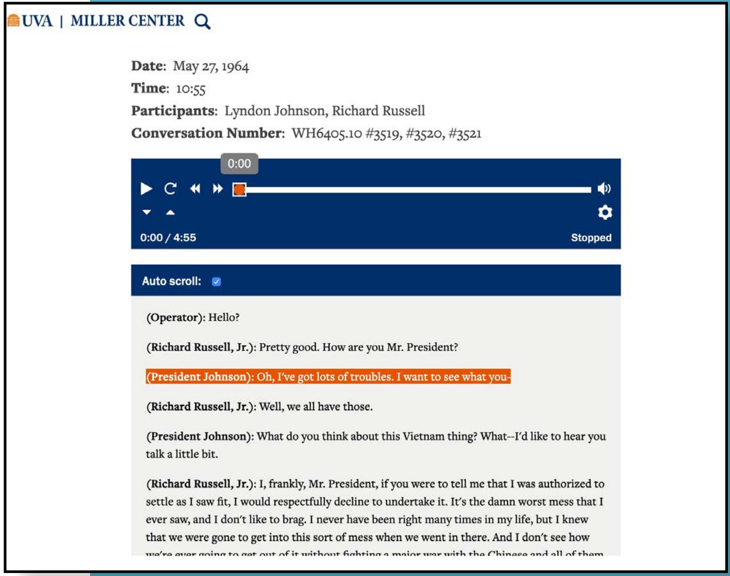
- The Miller Center for Public Affairs: A great place to start. Thousands of hours of recordings. Summaries and transcripts included. Very user-friendly. See this page for additional calls, searchable by administration and speaker.

- Scholarly sites: K.C. Johnson, a history professor at Brooklyn College and the CUNY Graduate Center, has used presidential recordings extensively in his teaching and scholarship. He has curated recordings on three different pages: one featuring his book on LBJ, another on the 1964 election, and another on a range of topics related to the Johnson and Nixon administrations.

- Presidential libraries: This is where I discovered the series of phone calls between President Kennedy and Ross Barnett. Background information, transcripts, and guiding questions included. See also the LBJ Library, which has a large, searchable database of over 9,000 digital calls made by the Johnson administration from 1963-1969, and the Nixon library, which has newly-released material.

- YouTube: When it doubt, try YouTube. The research can be quicker and there are some easy grabs, including this meeting between JFK and the Joint Chiefs during the Cuban Missile Crisis and Richard Nixon discussing All in the Family.

In all, these sources added a new dimension to my history curricula, opening up new ways to engage students in primary source analysis, U.S. history, and presidential politics. If you incorporate this material into your teaching, I hope you find it as useful as I did and would be curious to learn about your experiences.



Date: May 27, 1964
Time: 10:55
Participants: Lyndon Johnson, Richard Russell
Conversation Number: WH6405.10 #3519, #3520, #3521

(Operator): Hello?

(Richard Russell, Jr.): Pretty good. How are you Mr. President?

(President Johnson): Oh, I've got lots of troubles. I want to see what you-

(Richard Russell, Jr.): Well, we all have those.

(President Johnson): What do you think about this Vietnam thing? What--I'd like to hear you talk a little bit.

(Richard Russell, Jr.): I, frankly, Mr. President, if you were to tell me that I was authorized to settle as I saw fit, I would respectfully decline to undertake it. It's the damn worst mess that I ever saw, and I don't like to brag. I never have been right many times in my life, but I knew that we were gone to get into this sort of mess when we went in there. And I don't see how

A recording of a 1964 phone call between President Lyndon Johnson and Senator Richard Russell about Vietnam.

The Archive as Community Corner

Yukie Ohta, Founder and Director of the SoHo Memory Project and Archivist at LREI

A side-by-side comparison of LREI students at "June Camp"/the farm trip, then (1920s), and "now" (2016), LREI Archives.

In the archives world, I wear two hats.

In my professional hat, I am Founder and Director of the SoHo Memory Project (SMP), a nonprofit organization that documents the evolution of the New York City neighborhood now called "SoHo" ("South of Houston Street"). SMP focuses on the decades between 1960 -1980 when SoHo was a vibrant artists' community. Our mission is to preserve SoHo's past so that present generations understand our neighborhood's rich history and can make informed decisions as we shape its future.

In my volunteer hat, I am the archivist at LREI (also known as The Little Red Schoolhouse and Elisabeth Irwin High School), a Pre-K – 12 progressive independent school in New York City's Greenwich Village neighborhood. LREI, where my daughter is in sixth grade, has been a leader in progressive education since its founding in 1921.

Although my professional and volunteer roles seem different in many ways, they share one common goal: to use primary sources to build, shape, and continue community by placing the individual inside the timeline of history.

Institutions often frame archival materials as creations of a time and place far removed from the audience's contemporary experience—as if the archival record had little to do with the present. To bridge this perceived gap between today's subject and yesterday's object, in each facet of my work at both SMP and LREI I create access points that align the archival objects with everyday experience. In this way, I draw the viewer into a familiar space, intimately connecting today's viewer with the historical archival record.

SoHo Memory Project Mobile Museum

The SoHo Memory Project Mobile Museum presents a user-friendly introduction to our neighborhood's rich history. It is a "historical society on wheels" that transports elements from the SMP archive into the community. Prohibitively expensive SoHo real estate prevents me from ever having a brick and mortar presence; thus, instead of my audience coming to me, I (and my Mobile Museum) go to them.

The SMP Mobile Museum is an interactive cabinet of curiosities that folds up into a wheeled box. It can navigate the bustling urban environment of today's SoHo while showing visitors a glimpse of SoHo's past. The Mobile Museum chronicles the evolution of SoHo from farmland to high-end retail hub, charting its cycles of development and placing current day SoHo in the larger context of New York City's history. Reproductions of archival items such as documents and photographs are incorporated into Museum exhibitions alongside familiar, everyday objects. Designed to be accessible to all audiences, the Mobile Museum's current exhibit, entitled "SoHo 1960-1980," includes objects, ephemera, photographs, sound, and video, as well as unconventional media such as 3-D-printed miniatures, comic books, LP record jackets, family photo albums, a smelling station, and even View-Masters.

In addition to looking and reading about SoHo, visitors to the Mobile Museum are encouraged to listen, touch, and smell, thereby engaging all of the senses for a visceral experience of time and place. The following are some examples of the Mobile Museum's unique use of diverse archival sources:

look at me
EPISODE 1
EPISODE 2
EPISODE 3

SoHo Memory Project Mobile Museum, display with View-Masters.

Object

A salvaged cast iron detail from a building façade is placed next to a pile of alphabet refrigerator magnets on a shelf. Visitors are encouraged to stick magnets on the cast iron piece to understand that while building exteriors in SoHo are often made to resemble carved stone, many are actually made by pouring molten metal into molds. Visitors are encouraged to lift the detail to discover that it is hollow (cast) and that it is very heavy (iron). Bringing a bit of archival knowledge into the present, visitors are then offered a magnet that reads "Is it cast iron?" to take and stick on SoHo buildings encountered on their walks to see if those façades, too, are made of cast iron.

Film

A 1975 documentary film about a single block on Crosby Street in SoHo plays on an iPad with a sign encouraging visitors to listen to how the people in the film speak. The listener/viewer notices there was a cadence to speech in 1970s New York that is different from ours today. The unfamiliar is aligned with the familiar as they hear the voices of 1970s garbage collectors, parking lot attendants, and residents above a cacophony of recognizable street noises such as cars honking, people shouting, and garbage trucks roaring. They also see the dated clothing and hair styles. Perhaps they also notice that some of the buildings remain unaltered into the present day (thanks to the Landmarks Preservation Commission).

Audio

On the shelf below the iPad is a cassette player with headphones that plays "The Current Loft Situation," a 1979 segment from "The Artists in the City," a public radio show. An artist is interviewed about the struggles she has had with her landlord to keep her rent affordable and to hold on to her loft studio. This now-familiar trope suggests the beginnings of New York City's "gentrification" and consequent rising rents, a now widespread phenomenon. The tape recorder and its contents are then at once familiar and a vestige of the past.

Photography

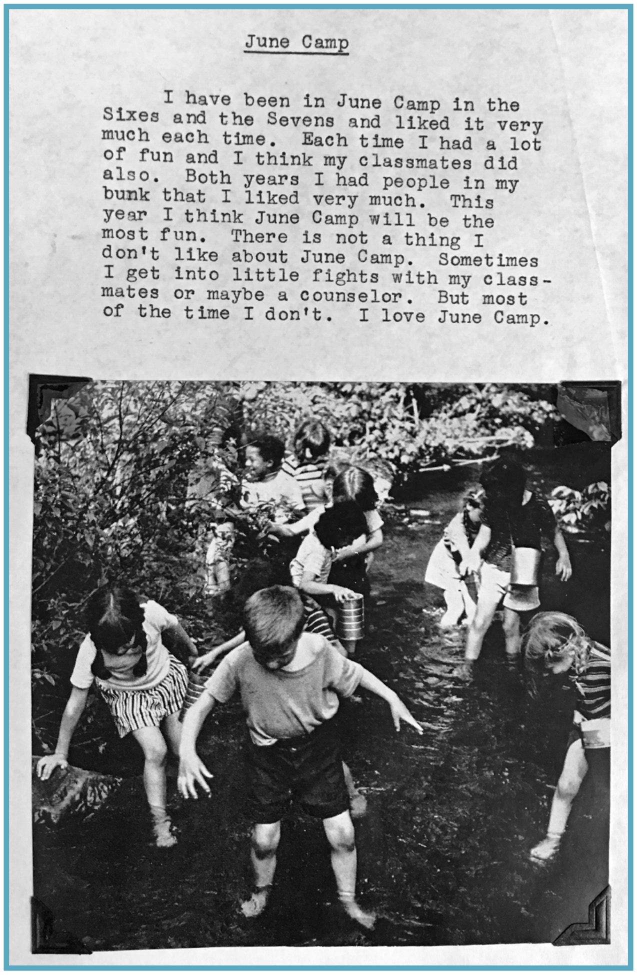
One of the most popular displays in this exhibit are the View-Masters, toys which some visitors of a certain age will remember well from childhood. Three reels of archival photographs in three separate View-Masters recount the history of SoHo— Episode 1: Before SoHo was SoHo, Episode 2: SoHo 1960-1980, Episode 3: SoHo Today. Using 21 images with captions, the View-Masters recount SoHo's evolution from colonial days to the present.

Artwork

On the top shelf of the Mobile Museum is Last Respects, a 1980 assemblage artwork made with found materials (aerosol cans, a flattened tin can, and a sandwich box in a wooden crate) by a SoHo artist. It is durable enough to be touched (with permission of the artist), and people are encouraged to do so. Visitors are reluctant at first to handle the piece, conditioned as they are to look but not touch works of art. Touching the piece allows visitors to experience its tactility as well as the thrill (albeit small) of doing something that would otherwise be "forbidden" in a traditional museum setting. Visitors then connect to the work beyond mere looking.

Firsthand Account

Several copies of a comic book entitled The Barking Dog Museum, are fanned out on top of Last Respects. The comic book depicts a man, the artist who made Last Respects, and his dog Homer sitting on the steps of a storefront. Inside the comic book is an interview with the man about his life in SoHo in the 1970s as an artist, written out in comic book speech bubbles. It turns out that the artist is Rick Parker, the illustrator who drew the popular 1990s cartoon Beavis and Butt-head. Parker left SoHo to work for Marvel Comics because he could not make a living through his artwork, his true passion. This story echoes that of many other artists who turned to commercial art out of necessity.



June Camp

I have been in June Camp in the Sixes and the Sevens and liked it very much each time. Each time I had a lot of fun and I think my classmates did also. Both years I had people in my bunk that I liked very much. This year I think June Camp will be the most fun. There is not a thing I don't like about June Camp. Sometimes I get into little fights with my classmates or maybe a counselor. But most of the time I don't. I love June Camp.

An LREI "June Camp" photo and essay from the 1950s, LREI Archives.

The comic book's advertisements are reproductions from 1970s issues of the SoHo Weekly News. The ads are for a local cinema and a local music venue called CBGB, where the Sunday night lineup showcases the bands Blondie opening for the Ramones. These ads ground the stories Parker recounts in his interview within a specific time and place.

Smell

There is no way to preserve an archival smell. It is, however, possible to simulate one. SoHo used to be a neighborhood of factories. This meant that every block had its own scent, the aroma of the thing(s) being manufactured. Jars that smell like baking (vanilla cake mix), pepper (peppercorns), and leather (leather scraps) link the visitor to this SoHo of the past through smell, a sense closely linked to memory. Olfactory experience has the power to trigger powerful recollections, especially childhood memories, because it is in early life when we smell many things for the first time.

Audience Participation

"Vintage" postcards with images of children playing in drafty lofts and on deserted streets read "What was the funnest thing about growing up in SoHo?" Responses from people who grew up in SoHo in the early 1970s recount how they used to ride their bicycles in their homes or collect discarded doll parts and fabric scraps outside local factories to play with as toys.

Next to the postcards is a box of doll parts and fabric scraps with a prompt asking: "SoHo children made toys from items discarded by local factories. What would you make from the objects in this 'toy' box?" Visitors, especially children, are encouraged to play with items in the box. One hopes that, if only for a brief moment, the visitor would engage with this prompt and thus experience a moment of creative thinking.

Visitors also have an opportunity to contribute to the exhibition by sharing memories about their own neighborhoods, to illustrate the ways in which SoHo is at once unique and at the same time one part of a larger, worldwide community. Postcards from Vietnam, Brazil, Ohio, and New Jersey decorate a bulletin board.

LREI Farm Trip Presentation

The ethos behind the Mobile Museum's multi-sensory model of presenting the archive can translate into a connection between past and present in a different—though no less powerful—way within a more traditional, classroom setting.

An integral part of a progressive education curriculum is experiential learning. From its inception, LREI has had its students spend part of their school year in the countryside. Most students have not experienced life in nature outside of the tall buildings and crowded sidewalks of New York City. Thus, every year, beginning in third grade, the students take trips outside the city. The earliest are four-day farm trips. For many, it is their first experience away from home. They are nervous and excited at the same time.

In 2017, I went into LREI third and fourth grade classrooms to talk to a class about an upcoming farm trip. I hoped to alleviate any fears they might have about leaving home. I took the idea of placing individuals inside the timeline of history from the SMP Mobile Museum and translated it into an age-appropriate classroom lesson about taking a school trip upstate.

I began by reading a description of the LREI farm trip from Agnes De Lima's 1942 book The Little Red School House and asked the students what they thought the author was describing. Many guessed correctly right away that it was talking about LREI's farm trip but many were also surprised to hear that the book was written so long ago.

I explained that LREI's very first farm trip was in 1925, and therefore that year's farm trip would be the school's 92nd. The students were very impressed by that number and were even more impressed when I told them that the farm trip used to take place during the entire month of June. Many thought this was "not fair," that they wished they could go to the farm for a month. Others couldn't imagine leaving home for a whole month.

Object/Artwork

I then passed around some (very well protected) archival items: a pressed flower and an illustrated song, made by LREI students from long ago. I had the students guess when the items were made. Using their deductive reasoning skills, they guessed the 1960s (and they were more-or-less correct) because of the discoloration of the paper and the brittleness of the flower. Handling actual "old things" seemed to bring home to them the idea that the farm trip was something that the school had been doing for a "long time."

Photography / Firsthand Account

I then presented a slideshow of photographs from farm trips in the 1940s and 1950s showing past students in their bunks, doing chores, and having fun. I asked for a volunteer to read a short "essay" written by a student in the 1950's about why he loves "June camp," as it was called when the students went away for the entire month of June.

The archival photos were followed by a series of photographs from the last year's farm trip. The contemporary images, like the vintage images, also depicted current students in their bunks, doing chores, and having fun. The students were thrilled to see the familiar faces of older LREI students they knew on the screen.

Audience Participation

After the slideshow, I asked the students two questions:

"How was the farm trip from long ago different from your farm trip last year?" and "How was the farm trip from long ago similar to your farm trip last year?"

The students came up with many differences: the trip used to last a month and now it's a week, the trip used to be in June and now it's in October, the students used to go swimming and now they don't (or can't). There were many similarities as well: the students all had to clean up and do chores, they all had bunks (though now they have bunkbeds!), they all brushed their teeth, they all explored nature, and, most importantly, they all had fun.

I finished the session with a final slide, a photo of LREI founder Elisabeth Irwin and students on a farm trip in the late 1920's alongside a group photo from last year's trip. I hoped that this final slide reinforced the idea that, through the farm trip, LREI students become part of LREI history, and that, even if they are a little nervous or scared about going away for four days, they, like the many LREI students before them, will undoubtedly learn many things and have a wonderful time.

After my presentation, the students wrote me thank you notes.

Cy wrote, "I thought it was really cool how their artwork is so similar to ours…Another similarity is that both of them were awesome…I was so so so so excited for the farm after your share."

Palma said, "One of my favorite parts was when you told us that there had been 91 farm trips so far."

Conclusion

When teaching with archival materials of all types, I have found that the barrier between object and subject breaks down if the viewer can personally relate to the material. By providing multiple entry points into a narrative, the visitor is more likely to find a comfortable way to relate to the past, and the use of sight, touch, sound, and sometimes smell can more easily transport the visitor to a long-ago time and place.

The SMP Mobile Museum provides a glimpse of a bygone era, a vision of the neighborhood that allows visitors to see today's SoHo with new eyes. This perspective of the neighborhood's evolution fulfills SMP's mission to show current residents the SoHo that came before, ensuring that, in planning for the future of this unique neighborhood, residents can preserve SoHo's defining characteristics.

In the case of LREI, the students see their peers, past and present, in photographs of generations of LREI farm trips. The similarities between old and recent photos of LREI kids and teachers on farm trips teach students about and place them within an unbroken school tradition. Students take away from their encounter with the farm trip archival materials a sense of institutional pride and of place within their school history.

Each archival object or document I exhibit and present in both the Mobile Museum and for students in advance of the LREI farm trip, while individually compelling, cannot as effectively connect to the audience on its own. Experienced collectively, however, with multiple objects, documents, images, or archival sensory experiences telling the story of SoHo or of LREI school history, these materials provide visitors or students with a visceral, and therefore more powerful sense of past time and current place. While wearing each of my archival hats, I adopt this tactic and harness the evocative potential of primary sources to build, shape, and continue community, placing today's individuals inside the timeline of history.

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