

## What Primary Sources Teach: Lessons for Every Classroom

By Jen Hoyer, Kaitlin H. Holt, and Julia Pelaez with Brooklyn Public Library.  
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In *What Primary Sources Teach: Lessons for Every Classroom*, authors Jen Hoyer, Kaitlin H. Holt, and Julia Pelaez with Brooklyn Public Library describe their successful collaborative education program, Brooklyn Connections, and present a thoroughly developed, interesting, and accessible approach to incorporating work with archival materials into classrooms. As an educator who often works with marginalized students, I found that this book offers useful resources to connect archival, primary sources with students and classrooms of all ability levels and experiences.

The Brooklyn Public Library's stated mission is to "ensure the preservation and transmission of society's knowledge, history and culture, and to provide the people of Brooklyn with free and open access to information for education, recreation and reference."<sup>1</sup> The authors note that "[m]ost of Brooklyn's 2.7 million residents live within a half-mile of a BPL branch." The institution's vision and its support of diversity, equity, and inclusion are central to the work. This is illustrated throughout the work of the Brooklyn Connections programs that seek to highlight various types and topics of primary sources. All are welcome in the archives.

Classrooms where the school-based Brooklyn Connections programs originated are described as populated by primarily low-income fourth- through twelfth-grade students, and the projects center research on local history topics. The book's introduction cites the reach of the program at almost 18,000 students since it began in 2007 (p. x). The Brooklyn Public Library is a true community resource, and its support of this program underscores the importance of local history as part of students' education. These archival sources come from the local community—1952 newsprint clippings from the *Brooklyn Eagle* about Jackie Robinson's music foundation, various maps of the borough, a photograph of a stained-glass window in Brooklyn's Plymouth Church—and inviting schoolchildren to use these resources enables them to see themselves reflected in the archival record. This book is a strong resource for educators wanting to incorporate primary sources or, more specifically, lessons from an archives into their classrooms. This is a model that can be used beyond the local Brooklyn communities. Archivists who follow the framework developed by the authors can engage students with local records.

The authors present a ready-made toolkit that will be especially useful for those new to the work of teaching with archival documents; this toolkit provides accessible lessons for primary source instruction that can be put to immediate use in the classroom and can be used by students with few or no changes. The authors include examples of some of the interesting documents held by the Center for Brooklyn

History; in addition to the resources previously mentioned, there are political cartoons from the local *Brooklyn Eagle* newspaper, maps connecting place names taken from Native communities, and ephemera from a Brooklyn restaurant that references the end of Prohibition. The authors offer different exercises to teach document analysis and include lessons such as understanding bias in historical sources and developing a research question. Handwritten documents include transcriptions that remove barriers between students and archival sources that are written in cursive or historical penmanship that could be difficult for the modern reader to decipher. These small details incorporated into the lessons highlight the work's focus on accessibility, which the authors view as crucial in welcoming students of all levels and abilities to the archives. The wide variety of records presented in the book expands engagement—visual sources may connect with students in different ways than text does. Including a variety of resources helps different students connect in different ways. For example, reading the culinary offerings on a menu for a “Subscription Dinner to Ladies” from the Montauk Club provides one opportunity for discussion, while considering the stylized illustration on the document allows additional conversation. The authors provide “Question Stem Flashcards” with who, what, where, when, why, how questions (p. 86) to guide the dialogue around both this example and wider primary source instruction. What may the illustration be referencing? How does that change what we know about the menu? The questions scaffold class discussion around the primary source.

I do not believe it is hyperbole to describe the authors as experts in the field. Collectively, they have worked at several organizations known for their strength in programming and outreach and have practical experience with teaching and historiography using archives. The “About the Authors” section cites the authors’ interest in how “dialogue around how access to information affects individuals and their identity within larger communities” (p. 169) and mentions that they have received awards for innovation with archives and have held roles on the Accessibility Committee of Brooklyn Public Library (p. 170). The authors’ experience is evident in the thoughtful lesson plans and the acknowledgment of scaffolding in engaging students with materials. One gains a certain comfort and expertise from familiarity with an archival collection that fosters an easy dialogue with visitors as they are introduced to the materials. One can imagine that the students who participated in the Brooklyn Connections programs benefited from both under the direction of the authors. The recommendations and lesson plans the authors provide for using local collections in work with students allow this same familiarity to be replicated through archival sources from one’s own local repositories.

As the authors mention in the foreword, the education program they describe in this book and the benefit of incorporating work with archives into the classroom setting are not limited to the study of history and social studies. Archival documents can support STEM exploration, inspire original interpretations in art, and provide context for creative writing. For example, their use of resources on

the construction of the Brooklyn Bridge allowed them to discuss engineering with students. The archives as a classroom can teach students to think critically and to evaluate sources—a fundamental skill of an informed citizen.

The authors cite accessibility as a goal of both the Brooklyn Connections project and the resources they provide in this book. In this work, accessibility is not an afterthought but an equal partner in consideration of the classroom communities served. The authors thoughtfully approach issues of accessibility and incorporate them into every exercise they present. While wonderful for education, this consideration is perhaps equally important for archives, which one should not consider as a place only for those with academic credentials or higher degrees. The thread of accessibility that is woven throughout this book speaks to the importance of incorporating archival resources into K–12 classrooms for students of all levels and abilities. As the authors note, “choosing sources that reflect a diverse range of cultural experiences—most essentially those of your audience—provides a highly effective entry for understanding” (p. 3). If students are empowered to connect with archival sources and view the archives as a space that is open to them, a barrier between the student and the primary source is broken down, both in the classroom setting and in future encounters with archival documents. Students feel more confident in analyzing and interacting with these resources through the specialized approach that differentiation allows, which the authors define as “a process that involves assessing where students are and creating instruction that meets their unique set of needs” (p. 1). Via differentiation, a struggling reader may be asked to work with a photograph rather than a textual document. This student can then incorporate additional primary sources into their work and gain a familiarity with document analysis and interpretation. It may not be too far a leap to imagine that introducing classrooms to archival work may one day pay dividends in the continuing work of engaging people in the archival profession.

Further discussion of differentiation suggests that awareness of diversity in the learning abilities of students is useful in adapting the book’s lessons and supporting students in primary source instruction. The authors provide a list of questions they ask educators prior to working with their classes; these questions can provide additional information about students’ individual learning needs. While I am sure that this knowledge would bolster the archival education programs and the experiences of some students, it may not always be realistic to expect a teacher to provide these answers due to time restraints and additional restrictions. The authors seem to acknowledge this when they write, “Knowing classroom dynamics ahead of time has the dual benefit of assisting with preparation and pivoting on the spot as learning needs become apparent in the moment” (p. 4). This pivoting is well known to anyone who has been charged with commanding the attention of children, particularly those with whom they are just establishing a relationship. One must read the room and be able to change course accordingly depending on what lessons students connect to or what may not resonate as expected. This planning for different

learning abilities and needs is essential, but so is flexibility. The authors do provide some strategies for pivoting in real time during a lesson, such as moving to group work if that is best for the students. In the best-case scenario, the person leading the lesson would have access to this information; yet this is not always the case. Teachers tell museum and archival educators that the time available for field trips is limited and may not allow extensive lessons and conversations prior to the visit, which is a challenge educators face whether they are working with classrooms in long-term or short-term projects.

As the authors note in the introduction, however, “One does not need an education degree to deliver collections-based instruction and/or invite students into one’s archival spaces” (p. ix). The resources provided in this work serve all who may be welcoming students into an archives. This book is not just a tool for the novice but meets educators across levels of experience. I use the term “educator” to refer to those working with students, although, as the book reinforces, that could be archivists, curators, collection managers, or teachers. The book aligns with both local and national education standards and provides suggestions for introducing new topics to classrooms for those who are looking closely at curricula as part of their work. While the value to early career educators cannot be overstated, the book’s creative and thoughtful approach to pedagogy would be useful to educators across the span of their careers.

Perhaps it feels unnecessary to discuss the index of a book in its review, but the one included in this work could be useful by itself. Much like the lesson plans, one can use it as a jumping off point for additional research. It is yet another example of the thoughtful approach taken by the authors throughout this project—a cohesive collection of resources for educators in service of using archival materials in the classroom.

*What Primary Sources Teach: Lessons for Every Classroom* presents a robust introduction to the inclusive, collaborative Brooklyn Connections program. Through the course of the book, readers learn tools for teaching with archival sources, receive lessons that can be brought directly into classroom use, and consider larger ideas from both the archival and education fields. This is a resource valuable to classroom teacher and archival professional, both separately and in instances where the two overlap or sometimes merge. While many mention accessibility in archives and education, Jen Hoyer, Kaitlin H. Holt, and Julia Pelaez with Brooklyn Public Library provide us with a roadmap of how to reach it in the classrooms of Brooklyn and, one may hope, beyond.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Brooklyn Public Library, “About Brooklyn Public Library,” 2022, <https://www.bklynlibrary.org/about>.