Collaborative Teaching with Digital Archives
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Good afternoon. My name is Hannah Alpert-Abrams and I am a CLIR postdoctoral fellow in data curation and latin american studies at UT Austin.

As a researcher, I work in the field of critical digital archives. My work involves thinking about how we digitize history, why we digitize history, and how we can improve our digital practice to better serve our communities and support our partners.

I have focused for most of the past year on the partnership between LLILAS Benson and the AHPN.

As you all know by now, the AHPN partnered with the University of Texas in 2011. One of the goals of that original partnership was to share technical knowledge and resources in order to improve access to digitized files from the archive.

The digital portal to the AHPN, which you heard about this morning, was the outcome of that goal, and it has been the most public aspect of the partnership.

But a second goal was to build relationships through education and outreach. We hoped that the partnership between the University of Texas and the AHPN would help bring researchers together over a shared interest in the history preserved here.

There is so much to learn from these records, about how people have lived and died, about how this state has operated, and, yes, about how rights have been violated and justice might be pursued.

We hoped — and I say "we" but this is before my time — we hoped that the digital portal would help scholars like the ones assembled here to talk to each other and to work together to find new ways of analyzing the archive and of remembering the past.

And we hoped that the digital portal, and the partnership between UT and the AHPN, would attract a new generation of students. By using the digital portal in the classroom, we hoped to help younger generations to learn about a history that is largely kept silent, especially in the United States.

This outreach is what I'm going to talk to you about today. I'm going to focus on four graduate seminars that were taught at UT between 2013 and 2018 with the goal of introducing students to the digital collection.

I'm going to begin by telling you about how these classes were conceived and what their pedagogical goals were.

Then I'm going to describe one of the classes in some detail. Last spring, I cotaught a course called Modern Central American History through Digital Archives. I'm going to describe how we used that course to reimagine historical pedagogy in the digital age, and how that created new opportunities for our students to engage with historical collections like the AHPN.

Class descriptions

I'll start with a description of the classes.

Four graduate seminars about the digital archives of central america have been taught since 2011.

To be more specific, three have been taught, and we'll be teaching a fourth next fall.

The seminars attracted students from the fields of Latin American Studies, History, literature, and information studies.

The four seminars all had slightly different configurations. The first seminar, taught in 2013, was a traditional history class about Guatemala. The classes taught in 2016 and 2018 took a digital approach to teaching the history of central America. And the class that we'll be teaching in the fall focuses almost entirely on digital archives, using the AHPN as a case study.

They also were all taught by different people, including Dr. Garrard, Dr. Kelly McDonough, Theresa Polk, Kent Norsworthy, and me. Most of them were taught collaboratively by two or more people.

Because collaborative teaching is not the norm in the United States, teaching collectively was one of the major innovations that these seminars introduced. They demonstrate how researchers and archivists can work together to teach about historical records.

Our second innovation was to focus on the premise that digitization itself changes the way that we understand and study the past.

Let me explain.

Research in the archives has never been a transparent process, as the example of the AHPN itself shows. As Kirsten Weld writes, work in the AHPN is framed by two archival logics: the logic of surveillance and the logic of justice.

Navigating those logics is part of how we extract information from the archive. At the AHPN, that process of extraction is mediated by the archivists. It is their intimate knowledge of the collection that shapes the ways that researchers access records.

Navigating a digital archive requires researchers to work within a different kind of logic. One reason is because digital archives hide the logic of the archive itself. In online collections, the archivists often become invisible. We can't see the way that humans are mediating access to information. We also can't see the internal structures of the collection as clearly. The logics of surveillance and justice are hidden too.

A second reason that digital archives require a different kind of logic is that they introduce new ways of understanding. As Lara Putnam has written, the geography of the digital archive is different from the geography of the physical archive. Researchers working with digital materials can't experience the feeling of being in this place which is so much a part of the history it records.

The experience of reading a digital archive is different, too. Researchers often have more faith in the accuracy of a digital search than in the accuracy of one that is done by hand. Their movement through information is driven by different instincts … and different algorithms.

To summarize:

In the four courses that we have taught at LLILAS Benson, we wanted to teach students about the history of Guatemala and about the history of the AHPN. The innovative part of our work was the integration of digital archival practice and theory into our curriculum. This has fundamentally changed the way we teach about archives.

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In the time that remains, I'm going to explain how we accomplished this goal by describing more specifically the seminar that we taught last semester. The seminar was called "Modern Central American History through Digital Archives," and it was taught by Dr. Garrard and me.

The seminar combined traditional history with archival study. Students were asked to read and analyze scholarship about the history of central america, especially El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Guatemala.

At the same time, students were asked to work closely with a variety of digital collections from central america, including the materials in the Latin American Digital Initiatives platform and the digital portal to the AHPN.

The focus of this work was not on the material held in the collections themselves, but rather on the form and function of the collections. Through a series of workshops, we asked students to think about how digital collections shape history and historical research methods.

We began by critically examining standard approaches to research. For example, consider how we conduct a search online. Tools like google make searching seem simple, as if it were possible to answer any question by typing a query into a search bar.

In fact, searching is highly constructed. In the case of the AHPN, for example, you can search for a person's name. But to understand your results, you have to know that only the names of people associated with a ficha have been recorded. Even then, the names are often incomplete or spelled in multiple ways. We asked the students: What does this teach you about how bureaucracies function? What does it say about the ways that individuals disappear from history memory?

Similarly, you can search the ahpn by date, but it is necessary to understand that while some documents have specific dates, many are associated with a broadly defined time frame. A search by date may not return the expected results. Again, this requires a more sophisticated research method. But it also allows students to understand the difficulties of reconstructing archival records in time.

As this example shows, in a digital collection, an apparently neutral practice like searching turns out to be constructed by metadata and by algorithms. It turns out to produce subjective results.

This matters because researchers working with archives like the AHPN are in the field of reconstructing histories that have been silenced and stories that desperately need to be told. It is essential that we know how to do this with care, especially in a digital age.

I hope this brief overview has helped to demonstrate how the AHPN has led faculty and librarians at UT to develop innovative approaches to teaching and learning about history.

We have drawn on the resources of the AHPN digital portal to introduce students to new research methods and new ways of communicating research findings.

We hope that our students have left these classes with a better understanding of the crucial role that archives like the AHPN play in the creation of history and in the pursuit of a more just future.