



Learning History through Digital Preservation: Student Experiences in a LGBT Archive

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Abstract:	Archivists have become increasingly interested in the role as educators. This project builds upon this interest by asking what can students gain in history learning when they are put in the role of archivist? To study this, 43 MSLIS students engaged in digital preservation of oral histories from the Lesbian Herstory Archives in Brooklyn, NY, and were surveyed at the completion of the project to uncover their perceived learning of LGBT history. Results indicate that students perceived increases in their understanding of and interest in LGBT history and issues. This study has implications for further partnerships between archivists and educators.



Learning History through Digital Preservation: Student Experiences in a LGBT Archive

ABSTRACT

Archivists have become increasingly interested in their role as educators. This project builds upon this interest by asking what students can gain in history learning when they are put in the role of archivist? To study this, 43 MSLIS students engaged in digital preservation of oral histories from the Lesbian Herstory Archives in Brooklyn, NY, and were surveyed at the completion of the project to uncover their perceived learning of LGBT history. Results indicate that students perceived increases in their understanding of and interest in LGBT history and issues. This study has implications for further partnerships between archivists and educators.

Introduction

In the summer of [2013](#), [the United States Supreme Court invalidated the Defense of Marriage Act \(DOMA\)](#), leading to the federal recognition of same-sex marriage ([Liptak](#)).

This announcement has been preceded in recent years by major changes to the legal treatment of gays and lesbians, including the repeal of the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell policy,” and the legalization of same-sex marriage in New York State ([Bumiller](#);

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3 | [Confessore](#)). The social and cultural transformation leading to the legal changes are more
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6 | rapid than many have expected, especially considering that homosexuality was classified
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8 | as a psychiatric disorder as late as 1973 ([Lyons](#)). These major changes in recent years
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10 | have prompted individuals across the United States to evaluate how these changes could
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12 | have occurred with such speed. To address these questions, LGBT archives such as the
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14 | Lesbian Herstory Archives (LHA) have created a primary source record detailing this
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16 | transformation from hostility or indifference to what some would describe as greater
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18 | levels of acceptance. LHA—located in Brooklyn, New York—is the world’s oldest and
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20 | largest collection of materials about lesbians and lesbian communities. The archive will
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22 | celebrate its fortieth anniversary in 2014 and has survived through small donations and an
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24 | all-volunteer staff.
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32 | In the Fall 2010, I began bringing select sections of my course “Projects in Digital
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34 | Archives” from the Pratt Institute School of Information and Library Science MSLIS
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36 | program to work on digitally preserving materials from the Herstory archive’s collection.
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38 | My interest initially was to use the course project as an opportunity for students to learn
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40 | about digital preservation in a realistic-context, including digitization as a means of
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42 | preserving audio material such as oral histories and recorded interviews. The goal was
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44 | for students to learn about digital archiving practice, and there was no prerequisite
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46 | interest in or understanding of LGBT history. However, as I proceeded with the course, I
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48 | noticed not only learning related to digital stewardship, but also accelerated learning
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50 | related to the historical content, in this case, LGBT history. I wondered [if](#) student
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52 | engagement in digital preservation activity [could be](#) a particularly effective way of
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learning history. To study this, I surveyed 43 MSLIS students across three semesters who participated in digital preservation at the LHA to uncover how this experience impacted their perceptions of their understanding of and interest in LGBT history.

However, before the results are discussed, past thinking on preservation as “history teacher” will be discussed, as well as explanations as to why digital preservation may be a particularly effective way of learning history.

Literature Review

Learning History through Preservation Activity

Currently, there is no literature on students digitally preserving primary sources as a way of learning history. The most relevant literature that is available is related to incorporating primary sources into undergraduate and secondary school history education. For example, Robyns discusses the archivist as educator within undergraduate programs, where an archivist partners with history educators to transform an archives into a learning laboratory. Under this arrangement, students are provided with archives instruction and must think critically about the primary sources they are confronted with. The literature available indicates that many archivists—after some initial trepidation—have embraced the challenge of making archives available to undergraduates through collaborations with faculty members (Malkmus; Carini). Related literature has focused on delivering archival instruction to undergraduates, with emphasis on how history education can be enhanced through developing a better understanding of primary sources and archives (Krause, "Learning"; Krause, "Undergraduates"; Duffy; Zhou).

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3 Making archives relevant to education extends beyond undergraduates to K-12 students
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5 and teachers. Teacher interests and needs with respect to archives [were](#) explored in 1998
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7 by [Gilliland-Swetland](#), Kafai, and Landis, and more recently by Hendry, who [suggests](#)
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9 that the “movement toward using archival documents in the K-12 classroom... presents an
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11 unprecedented opportunity for the archival community to become involved in elements
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13 and secondary education” ([p. 129](#)). A number of monographs have recently been
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15 published on the topic of using primary source materials in K-12 contexts, including
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17 *Primary Source Teaching the Web 2.0 Way* and *Using Primary Sources in the Classroom*
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19 ([Johnson; Vest](#)).

26 27 *LGBT History and Preservation*

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29 There are no known projects where students engage in preservation activity as a way of
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31 learning LGBT history. However, the most relevant related literature details constructing
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33 LGBT archives and histories using the sources that can be found, and the tensions that
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35 arise from this historicizing process. [A brief overview of LGBT histories, particularly as](#)
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37 [they are implicated in cultural heritage institutions, will be provided to illustrate how the](#)
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39 [students’ digital preservation activity is situated within a larger context of LGBT cultural](#)
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41 [preservation work.](#) Although a complete account of LGBT histories are beyond the scope
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43 this paper, well-known examples include Chauncey’s *Gay New York*, Kennedy and
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45 Davis’ *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, and Haggerty’s *Gay Histories and Cultures*.
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47 Literature related to the creation of LGBT archives include Nestle’s account of the
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49 creation of the Lesbian Herstory Archives, and Brown’s chronicling of the formation of
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51 LGBT archives from 1970 to 2008. With respect to recent issues involving LGBT
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3 collections and archives, DiVeglia studies donor issues from LGBT persons and O’Meara
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5 investigates the accessioning of born-digital works from LGBT persons.
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10 Outside the field of archives, related research in other cultural heritage domains with
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12 respect to LGBT content is growing. For example, in the field of historic preservation of
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14 places, [Lee](#) Dubrow has argued for the preservation of historically-relevant LGBT sites,
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16 and Oram discusses the awkward handling of same-sex relationships in historic homes.
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18 In the field of moving image and sound archiving, Pepe discusses the endangered status
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20 of LGBT moving images, including early footage of post-Stonewall activity like the 1971
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22 Christopher Street Gay Liberation Day. [And](#) in the field of museum studies, Nappo
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24 discusses how museums can reach out to established grassroots groups for building
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26 exhibits such as the Lesbian Herstory Archives and [observes](#) that the “political and social
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28 conditions are much more favorable for museums to incorporate LGBT collections and
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30 exhibits” [\(p. 114\)](#).
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39 Despite the interest in including LGBT material and historic sites in established cultural
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41 heritage institutions, others argue that this is problematic at best. Mills fears that gay
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43 histories—especially when brought into the context of a museum—threaten to create
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45 linear, grand progress narratives, which leave out the experiences of many such as
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47 transgender individuals. [He](#) [observes](#) that if LGBT histories are to be incorporated into
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49 cultural heritage contexts, they need to abandon linear-progress narratives “in favour of
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51 stories that take as their point of departure sexual intensities, tastes and roles, gender
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53 dissonances, dispositions and styles, queer feelings, emotions and desires” [\(p. 262\)](#).
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Digital Preservation and Learning Psychology

In creating digital masters of oral histories recorded on analog tape, the initial questions that a student may ask is who is this person, and what does she have to say that is worth preserving for future? Once a student listens to a recording, especially a recording from over 30 years ago, she may hear a world described with little correspondence to her present reality. For example, one collection digitized by students studied here include the original audio recordings that formed Kennedy and Davis' ethnography *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*. Kennedy and Davis use oral history as a way to elucidate how lesbian women constructed a gay community in Buffalo from the 1930 through the 1950s, a time popularly portrayed as being devoid of homosexual activity. The oral histories were conducted over a 13-year period, beginning in the late 1970s, with women who could talk about their experience from that time period and in that place. Oral histories cover topics such as sex, relationships, coming out, among other topics, and are told by women of white, black, and Native American racial backgrounds. Students were in some cases surprised by the things they would hear, and struck by how the knowledge available at that time differed from what is known today. For example, in one recording, a lesbian woman rejected the existence of a female orgasm. Students were stupefied to find that such seemingly obvious aspects of women's sexuality could be unknown, but understandable when considering such topics were taboo in popular media. The stories capture how the women lived during a time of great hostility, where all institutions were tilted against them.

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3 Primary source materials conjure past worlds in the minds of students, and provoke them
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5 to dig deeper to fill-in the gaps within their knowledge of the subject matter. However,
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7 not all historical materials prompt knowledge construction equally. In student learning of
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9 history, psychologists differentiate between a process of mastery and appropriation of
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11 historical narratives ([Wertsch, "Narrative Tools"](#)). Mastery describes a cognitive
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13 understanding of the narrative, yet does not mean a student necessarily believes it, or
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15 thinks it is personally meaningful. Appropriation indicates a desire towards mastery as
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17 well as the process where the narrative is integrated into the individual's identity (e.g.,
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19 she believes it and is willing to put her self forward in the re-telling of the narrative).
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21 Several scholars have demonstrated this distinction at work. For example, Wertsch uses
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23 the example of history education in the Soviet Union during the later stages of that
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25 regime (["Narratives"](#)). During that time, students would master the official state-
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27 sponsored narrative yet were secretly "doubting and resisting almost all official texts in
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29 the public sphere" ([p. 519](#)). Similarly, Pollman demonstrates how mastery and
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31 appropriation dynamics can be found in African American youth learning history.
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41 Considering the mastery/appropriation dynamic, engaging in digital preservation activity
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43 can be a particularly effective way of learning history. In engaging in digital
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45 preservation activity, the student is given the power to either strengthen or diminish the
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47 historical narrative through the stewardship of the primary source materials (in this case,
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49 tangible audiocassette recordings). The student, in recognizing her role in shaping the
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51 narratives available to the public and her power in this process, feels the responsibly
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53 given to her. The recognition of this responsibility leads to heightened engagement, and
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3 a need to understand the meaning of one's work. This search for meaning ultimately
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5 leads the student to the historic content itself and her relationship to it. The student can
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8 choose to resist the meaning of her activity, or fully embrace it by appropriating the
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10 narrative and acknowledging her relationship to it. This search for understanding one's
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12 role within the greater social context has the potential to accelerate the appropriation of
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14 the historic narrative.
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19 Pollman points out in the learning of history, individuals may choose to "privately resist"
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21 a narrative if it is in conflict with one's identity (p. 244). The narrative that the primary
22
23 source material supports is easier to appropriate if it fits within one's "identity
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25 trajectory." By identity trajectory, Wenger means not a "fixed course or a fixed
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27 destination," but something that is continually being constructed in a social context and is
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29 influenced by "multiple convergent and divergent trajectories" (p. 154). -Thus, we can
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31 imagine some narratives may be appropriated more readily than others depending on the
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33 narrative itself and the identities of the individuals approaching those narratives.
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41 Curriculum Overview

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43 The goal of [the](#) course "Projects in Digital Archives" is to provide students with the
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45 practical and theoretical know-how to create digital archives. This is accomplished by
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47 putting students into the role of designers where they create a tangible product in a
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49 meaningful social environment. In developing the digital archive, students engage in a
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51 multitude of tasks, such as digitizing archival material (audiocassettes containing oral
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53 histories), designing and deploying a digital presence, creating standardized metadata,
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3 and conducting research. Individual class sessions are organized around a problem-based
4 learning approach where students address a series of problems required to move forward
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6 with the digital archive. The course components, such as discussions, course readings
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8 and collaborative work, are oriented towards solving the week's problems. For example,
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10 the course readings on topics such as digitizing audio material or creating metadata
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12 become crucial to completing the project in a way that coincides with professional
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14 practices. Thus, students can readily see how neglecting to keep up with course readings
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16 is not only a detriment to themselves, but could disappoint the collective effort, with a
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18 related impact on the quality of the project and the community being served.
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27 On the first day of class, students are introduced to LHA by watching a video produced
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29 by the PBS program "In The Life," which showcases the archive's founders Joan Nestle
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31 and Deb Edel discussing the rationale for creating the archive, what the archive collects,
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33 and the archive's approach to access. A few weeks into the course, a class is held at the
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35 Herstory archive in Brooklyn, where noted LGBT activist and archivist Maxine Wolfe
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37 gives students an overview of the archive, a full-tour of the facility, completed by an
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39 open-ended discussion of the digital archiving project being undertaken.
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46 Students are divided into one of four groups (research, metadata, design, and technology)
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48 based on interests, and teams address important questions on how to proceed with the
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50 project. For example, the metadata team decides what metadata to create, what standard
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52 to use, and how metadata should be assigned. The technology team figures out what
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54 content management system to use and how to incorporate the design into the technology.
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3 The design team considers how to make the site useable and visually appealing. The
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5 research team considers digital rights management and what additional resources could
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7 be utilized to augment the archive. And the teams have to figure out how to work
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9 together to deliver a coherent product, as well as satisfy the interests of members of LHA.
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15 In addition to students having to solve the aforementioned problems, each class session
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17 includes some digitization activity. The class session begins with students digitizing
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19 audiocassettes (four tape players are available in the classroom), and class proceeds while
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21 the digitization occurs. In digitizing, students make use of audio digitization standards
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23 developed by an international body of audio archivists (IASA). By the end of the class
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25 session, the digitization is complete and the students upload the files to a server. After 12
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27 weeks, approximately 45 tapes are digitized.
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34 The students iteratively build the digital archive and have a tangible artifact to discuss
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36 and to show to their greater social network. For example, students share their work with
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38 others via social media (Facebook and Twitter) and their own personal websites. By the
39
40 end of the semester, the students had produced a professional, attractive digital archive.
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42 Completed digital archives include WAV files for preservation and MP3 files for
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44 listening, digitized photographs to visually augment the site, and each oral history
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46 cataloged in detail to improve discovery (see Figure 1). For more information, the course
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48 syllabi are available at http://url_removed_for_review_purposes.
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3 The completed archives include audio recordings of notable Lesbian artists and activists,
4 including Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich, and Mabel Hampton. The archive also includes
5 the oral histories that were used to form Kennedy and Davis' *Boots of Leather, Slippers*
6 *of Gold*. Together, these audio archives allow patrons to hear women discuss LGBT life
7 from the 1930s through the 1990s, effectively creating an aural experience of twentieth
8 century gay life as experienced by women.
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17 18 19 20 **Study Overview**

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22 This study is interested in what students [can](#) gain in history learning when they are placed
23 in the role of archivist. To [understand](#) this, the follow research question is posed:
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29 *Does student participation in digitally preserving LGBT historic content increase*
30 *student interest in and understanding of LGBT history and issues?*
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37 [To gather data](#), the curriculum as described above was implemented across three
38 semesters (Fall 2010, Fall 2011 and Fall 2012) at [the](#) Pratt Institute School of Information
39 and Library Science MSLIS program in New York City. On the final day of the 15-week
40 class, students are given an anonymous and voluntary survey to uncover their perceived
41 learning outcomes from engaging in the digital archive creation project. The instructor
42 left the room while the students filled-out the survey and collected the surveys after
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51 completion. The survey includes 26 questions, and the final three questions [were](#) used
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53 [to](#) answer the research question:
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- The DACP [digital archive creation project] increased my interest in LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) history and issues..
- The DACP increased my understanding of LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) history and issues.
- Please feel free to leave comments on the backside of this sheet. Thank you for your participation.

The first two questions have the scale 1-4 (4=Strongly Agree, 1 = Strongly Disagree, or Not Applicable), and the final question is a free-form response.

Forty-three MSLIS students were surveyed, with a semester and gender break-down as follows:

Fall 2010: 16 students (13 female, 3 male)

Fall 2011: 15 students (12 female, 3 male)

Fall 2012: 12 students (9 female, 3 male)

The analysis of the survey responses used basic statistics (average and standard deviation), as well as include a discussion of the relevant free-form responses.

Results

43 MSLIS students were surveyed, and 42 surveys were returned (97.67% response rate).

With respect to the questions of “increased my interest in LGBT history and issues,” the

average response was between strongly agree and agree (3.38). Similarly, with respect to the question of “increased my understanding of LGBT history and issues,” the average response was also between strongly agree and agree (3.54, see Table 1). Individual student response values are included in the appendix.

Table 1. Survey results (4=Strongly Agree, 1 = Strongly Disagree, or Not Applicable).

Question	Average	Standard Deviation
<i>Increased my interest in LGBT history and issues</i>	3.38	0.68
<i>Increased my understanding of LGBT history and issues</i>	3.54	0.63

Student response of “strongly agree” with respect to “increased my interest” or “increased my understanding” of LGBT history indicates very positive associations between engaging in the digital preservation activity and what they have learned or the interest they have developed with respect to LGBT history. Responses of “agree” indicate positive associations as well, however, less than “strongly agree.” Responses of disagree—which there were few—would indicate the student did not get any or little new understanding or developed interest in LGBT history. There were no students who responded with “strongly disagree.” These responses indicate that a byproduct of learning to digitally preserve historic materials is that it can increase a student’s perception of their understanding and interest in the history implicated in the materials. In the case of this project, the LGBT history becomes part of the curriculum, however only inexplicitly. The learning objectives stated on the course syllabus do not indicate that the course will teach LGBT history, although students perceive they are learning LGBT history through engaging in the digital preservation activity.

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3 Of the 43 surveys returned, 10 included a free-form response. Of those responses, only a
4 single response directly addressed the historic content from the Herstory archive that was
5 digitized. This is however not surprising, since the purpose of the course was to learn
6 about digital archives and preservation, and not specifically about learning LGBT history.
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13 This comment noted:

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17 *I loved doing the LHA project. The subject matter was very interesting, so doing the*
18 *listening was quite enjoyable. I felt that the site visit helped us understand client*
19 *interaction...*
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27 This comment indicates that the process of listening to the primary source recordings (in
28 order to digitize them and provide metadata for the recording) led to absorption in the
29 subject matter. This comment also indicates that the contextualization—through an
30 immersive visit to the archival site—helped this process.
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39 **Conclusion**

40 Past research has indicated that student engagement in tangible archive creation can
41 positively impact student reports of skills, confidence, and overall understanding of
42 digital archiving practice (Cocciolo). This study illustrates that digital preservation
43 activity not only teaches about digital preservation but can also be used as a method of
44 teaching historic content. Participants in this study agreed to strongly agreed that
45 engagement in digital archiving activity increased their understanding of and interest in
46 LGBT history and issues. However, as pointed out in the literature review, there are
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varying degrees of understanding that can be achieved. An individual can master a historical narrative, yet not necessarily appropriate it, or integrate the narrative into her identity. Since students “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that the project increased both their interest and understanding of LGBT history and issues, students perceived gains in their mastery and appropriation of the historic content. In this case, increased “interest” in the historic content indicates appropriation, where “disinterest yet understanding” would indicate only gains in mastery.

This study has implications for both history and archives education. It indicates that providing students with opportunities to be stewards of historic content—even if just temporarily through digital preservation work—can positively impact interest and understanding of historic content. This highlights opportunities for educators and archivists to form mutually beneficial partnerships where digital preservation activity and history learning can take place.

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Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold

[View the items in Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold](#)

Description

Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold is an intimate history of a lesbian community in Buffalo, New York. Ranging from the mid-1930s through the early 1960s, this ethnography of lesbian society is narrated with the backdrop of an average American city. The accounts within capture the complexity of lesbian culture, during a time period before the gay and lesbian liberation movements. The book focuses on the growth of consciousness and identity within the bar and house party community, and then the emergence of social and behavioral norms and rules. These communities formed from common bonds, as most women tried to keep a clear separation between life in the gay community and straight society. The book details the personal struggles and triumphs of the lesbian community during an intensely oppressive time, yet there are strong themes that are relatable to anyone. The women's stories express human experiences that we each encounter as members of a particular society; social identity, economic survival, love, sex, family, work, recreation, and participation in society as a whole. Small communities like the ones portrayed in Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold were the building blocks of love and support for larger, more public communities that continue to fight for equality and human rights today.

Judy T., 1978 (Tape 2)



Judy discusses butch and femme identities, social interactions, and role play within relationships. She expresses relief over how these once rigid demarcations of identity have become more flexible within the lesbian community. Later, however, she...

Figure 1: Student-created digital archive [for LHA, available online at http://herstories.prattsils.org](http://herstories.prattsils.org).

Appendix

Table 2. Student Responses to questions about interest and understanding of LGBT history after digitally preserving materials. Scale 1-4 (4=Strongly Agree, 1 = Strongly Disagree, or Not Applicable)

	<i>Increased my interest in LGBT history and issues</i>	<i>Increased my understanding of LGBT history and issues</i>
Fall 2010	<u>3</u>	<u>3</u>
	<u>3</u>	<u>3</u>
	<u>4</u>	<u>3</u>
	<u>4</u>	<u>Empty</u>
	<u>4</u>	<u>4</u>
	<u>4</u>	<u>4</u>
	<u>4</u>	<u>4</u>
	<u>4</u>	<u>4</u>
	<u>3</u>	<u>3</u>
	<u>2</u>	<u>3</u>
	<u>4</u>	<u>4</u>
	<u>4</u>	<u>4</u>
	<u>3</u>	<u>3</u>
	<u>4</u>	<u>4</u>
<u>Empty</u>	<u>Empty</u>	
Fall 2011	<u>3</u>	<u>3</u>
	<u>4</u>	<u>4</u>
	<u>4</u>	<u>4</u>
	<u>4</u>	<u>4</u>
	<u>4</u>	<u>4</u>
	<u>Empty</u>	<u>Empty</u>
	<u>4</u>	<u>4</u>
	<u>3</u>	<u>4</u>
	<u>4</u>	<u>4</u>
	<u>2</u>	<u>4</u>
	<u>3</u>	<u>4</u>
	<u>3</u>	<u>3</u>
	<u>3</u>	<u>3</u>
	<u>4</u>	<u>4</u>
<u>3</u>	<u>2</u>	
Fall 2012	<u>3</u>	<u>3</u>
	<u>3</u>	<u>3</u>
	<u>Empty</u>	<u>Empty</u>
	<u>3</u>	<u>3</u>
	<u>4</u>	<u>4</u>
	<u>3</u>	<u>4</u>
	<u>2</u>	<u>2</u>
	<u>3</u>	<u>2</u>
	<u>4</u>	<u>4</u>
	<u>4</u>	<u>4</u>
<u>2</u>	<u>2</u>	

	<u>3</u>	<u>3</u>
<u>Mean</u>	<u>3.38</u>	<u>0.68</u>
<u>SD</u>	<u>3.54</u>	<u>0.63</u>

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