‘REMEMBER THE LADIES’: UNCOVERING THE VOICES OF TENNESSEE’S SUFFRAGE MOVEMENT THROUGH PRIMARY SOURCE INSTRUCTION

JENNY HARRIS AND NICOLE WOOD

INTRODUCTION

A common challenge with teaching one-shot instruction sessions is engaging students and creating meaningful dialogue that will extend beyond the session(s). With 2020 marking the 100-year anniversary of the ratification of the 19th Amendment, librarians at Austin Peay State University’s Woodward Library decided to use the centennial as a marker for building information literacy sessions where students located, analyzed, and interpreted primary source documents surrounding the women’s suffrage movement. The library has a well-established relationship with the Women’s and Gender Studies Program, thus we collaborated with the coordinator of the program to develop two 75-minute instruction sessions using the Tennessee Virtual Archive and other resources as the focus of locating relevant primary sources. The goals of the sessions were to 1) teach students to evaluate the original source and 2) spotlight the inequities within the women’s suffrage movement itself.

By applying feminist pedagogy practices to the instruction sessions, students participated in discourse that moved beyond the issues of gender inequality that are centered solely on white women and challenged the suffrage movement as we know it for its lack of inclusion and oppression of women of color (Fritch, 2018). Through these sessions, students uncovered and analyzed primary sources related to local suffragists and anti-suffragists not commonly recognized in the historical narrative, and, by interpreting unambiguous propaganda posters and text-based sources, such as letters and newspaper clippings, they learned to draw personal conclusions about primary source materials without the assistance of secondary and tertiary sources.

FOCUS ON THE SUFFRAGE MOVEMENT

On August 18, 1920, the Tennessee House of Representatives ratified the 19th Amendment by a narrow one-point margin, making Tennessee the final vote required to add an amendment to the U.S. Constitution. With the 100th anniversary of women gaining the right to vote, we wanted to highlight the importance of the suffrage movement in the U.S. by specifically connecting it to local history, while also encouraging students to become active in the democratic process. The introductory course for women’s and gender studies seemed like a natural place to do this.

Introduction to Women’s and Gender Studies (WGS 2050) meets the requirement at Austin Peay State University for a social and behavioral science course as part of the General Education core. It is also the first course taken by students who minor in women’s and gender studies. Students enrolled in the course are typically first or second year scholars who are still developing research skills and may not have prior experience using the library’s resources. Furthermore, the course is interdisciplinary in nature and combines women’s and gender studies, African American studies, and history, creating a desirable setting for integrating an assignment focused on the suffrage movement. The original assignment for WGS 2050 requires students to research a marginalized historical figure from any point in history. We collaborated with the professor to restructure the assignment, asking students to focus their research on a suffragist or anti-suffragist and to incorporate two primary source documents into their final assignment. Because we wanted to help students identify voices that have traditionally been left out of the women’s suffrage narrative, we thought the
most authentic way to learn about this historical movement was to amplify the voices of the overlooked figures who participated in it.

**Planning the Sessions**

Since the sessions were comprised of primarily first and second-year students, some of whom were conducting primary source research for the first time, we wanted to ease them into their primary source analysis. This was done by incorporating both visual resources, which included political cartoons and propaganda, and text-based resources, such as newspaper articles and pamphlets. Opening the discussion with a visual example allowed students to critically engage with the archival material in a format that is more appealing than a block of text.

During the first instruction session, we opened with a poll activity using Poll Everywhere. The idea was to gauge what perceptions and ideas students had about women’s suffrage prior to discussing and analyzing historical documents. We also wanted to show them how to use brainstorming for keyword searching. Students were asked to submit answers for the question, “What word(s) do you associate with the suffrage movement?” Some of the responses included: women’s rights, feminism, voting, equality, resilience, strong, and power. The most common words were then used as search terms for a database demonstration.

**Figure 1: Word cloud of keywords students associate with the suffrage movement**

![Word cloud](image)

The primary database of focus for the instruction sessions was the *Tennessee Virtual Archive (TEVA)*, which serves as a digital repository for Tennessee’s history and culture. It provides background information and context for each collection it houses and offers an easy-to-navigate interface, allowing collections to be browsed by subject, creator, or media type. Since students were researching lesser-known historical figures, we recognized the potential need to consult a variety of sources. Therefore, we also briefly discussed other databases and archives, including the *Women’s Studies Archive: Women’s Issues and Identities, Women and Social Movements in the United States, 1600-2000*, and the University of Chicago’s Ida B. Wells Papers.

**Interpreting Primary Sources**

To get students comfortable with evaluating primary source documents, we asked students to interpret both visual and text-based resources. The purpose of this instruction technique was to encourage students to draw their own conclusions about primary sources without depending on secondary or tertiary interpretations; students were also urged to disregard the mindset that there was a “correct” response.

First, we shared a political cartoon that students selected for interpretation. Unlike a lengthy pamphlet or newspaper article, the cartoon clearly stresses the message the artist wanted to convey. The image depicts a happy mother reading about the passage of the 19th Amendment, while the rest of her family, including the cat, cower in fear. Without consulting any external sources for context, students answered the following questions:

- What can we deduce about the artist/author without looking up any additional information?
- What opinions did this person likely have about the suffragist movement?
- Does this cartoon/article raise any questions that you want to research further?

The students then used these guided questions to deduce that the image clearly contained anti-suffrage sentiments, and they unanimously expressed their wish to further investigate the image.
The political cartoons/propaganda acted as a warmup for the main primary source analysis. After interpreting the visual findings, students worked in small groups to analyze text-based information, such as letters and newspaper articles. They responded to the same questions, drawing their own conclusions about the authors and the authors’ thoughts about women earning the right to vote. By this point in the research process, students were already actively engaged in the material, and they could use the visual resources for comparison and contrast.

The next image students were asked to examine depicts an African American woman who has struck down the Grandfather Clause denying suffrage to African Americans and is now battling Jim Crow laws and segregation. The cartoon, titled "Woman to the Rescue!" was published in the African American periodical The Crisis in May 1916.

While the cartoon was originally created in support of both women’s suffrage and Black suffrage, it also appears in an anti-suffrage pamphlet that suggests permitting Black women to vote would be a threat to white supremacy. Examining this particular political cartoon and accompanying text through a modern lens, while being confronted with the reality of the historical viewpoint, provided a much more jarring and impactful experience than simply reading a scholar’s analysis in a journal article. Overall, we found the use
of political cartoons as an entry point into source evaluation and analysis to be an effective method for engaging students with primary source materials.

**APPLYING FEMINIST TEACHING PRACTICES**

Accardi (2013) writes in *Feminist Pedagogy for Library Instruction*, “Not only is feminist pedagogy concerned with subverting patriarchal subject matter, but it also is concerned with the way any subject matter is taught” (p. 25). Our focus with this assignment was to decenter ourselves in the classroom, to encourage students to take control of their learning, and to empower them to draw their own conclusions about the primary resources that were evaluated. Therefore, we wanted to give them an active role in each stage of the instruction session, from keyword brainstorming to resource analysis.

A central aim of this assignment was to amplify unheard and/or marginalized voices in the movement. While we did mention the role the National Women’s Party (NWP) and its’ founders, including Alice Paul, played in achieving their goals of women gaining the right to vote, it was vital to note that women of color played a significant role in the movement, though their stories often go untold. Activists such as Ida B. Wells and Mary Church Terrell, both of Memphis, TN, were two local figures who fought against racism while battling for the right for all women to vote. Fritch asserts that, “The combination of ensuring intersectionality is included within the content of each academic discipline and what we are teaching our students to teach is an important aspect of critical feminist theory” (2018, p.4). We wanted students to consider the way gender and race discrimination collided during the suffrage movement and to recognize the parallels with ongoing efforts to achieve equality.

Ultimately, we desired to put students in control of their own findings and reinforce the idea that a failed search is expected at times, which is why we search again; we re-search. We hoped to inspire students to see those failed searches as an opportunity for further investigation and as a way to hone in on more specific questions and discover the true stories behind many forgotten and disregarded texts.

**REFLECTION**

Upon reflection, we realized many factors were successful, but there is still room for improvement in our teaching practices and in the content we share with students. For example, trying to fit our learning outcomes in one session would have been impossible. Because the sessions were held over two class periods, students had time to reflect on the first session and come to the second session prepared to continue the conversation. Students were engaged with content and with one another, and they were especially interested in the visual components and being able to analyze what they saw. On the other hand, the space constraints of the computer lab in which we met for class made it difficult, at times, to facilitate active learning experiences, which occasionally hindered some students’ ability to engage with the material. Furthermore, our assessment efforts were informal and relied on feedback from the course instructor; therefore, we do not have much data to determine how the library instruction impacted each students’ knowledge of and applicability of the research process. In future sessions, we will invite students to reflect on their experience by asking:

- How will you use the knowledge gained?
- How will you take the skills learned in the instruction sessions and apply them to research in other disciplines?

Additionally, political cartoons on this topic primarily depict white individuals. In an article highlighting critical pedagogy in library instruction, Fritch writes, “The practice of speaking back to the oppressive ideology that prevails in our society through storytelling of real lived experiences empowers those in society who are marginalized and frequently silenced” (2018, p. 1). This project was intended to uncover unheard voices from this movement, and while we did introduce students to suffragists of color, much can be done to improve the outcomes of sessions in this respect. While TEVA contained very few political cartoons featuring suffragists of color, there are a number of political cartoons and propaganda from this time that do; they are just a little more difficult to find. However, future sessions will centralize and utilize such resources. Examples of websites that can be used for these searches include “What is a Vote Worth?” (http://whatisavoteworth.org/), which is maintained in a partnership between the Frazier History Museum, Jefferson County Public High Schools, the Metro Louisville Office for Women, and various civic organizations. Additional visual primary sources can be found on Hathi Trust (https://www.hathitrust.org/) and the Library of Congress website.

**CONCLUSION**

Using the 19th Amendment as a roadmap for the discovery and analysis of primary source documents in an introductory women’s and gender studies course proved to be a successful method to motivate first and second-year students who have little knowledge of the research process, as the assignment required them to engage with research and with each other, thus building a solid foundation for future collaborative research projects. Likewise, the assignment connected students to materials that encouraged critical thinking and inspired them to reconsider what equality means outside the historically-prominent narrative.
Librarians in a learner-centered environment are focused on what the learner (student) will learn during the session; think objectives or learning outcomes. But a feminist-centered environment is concerned with what the learner does with the knowledge acquired beyond the classroom setting (Accardi, 2013). From personal experience as students, having instructors that cared about what we learned made us care about what we learned. So, while our instruction sessions were learner-centered, they were also conducted from a feminist approach. This, of course, makes librarians more vulnerable in the classroom, but it also makes us more intentional. We attempted to equip students with the tools to be in control of what they learned—to find their own voice and draw from experiential knowledge—which will hopefully resonate with them beyond the library sessions, beyond the course, and beyond their academic careers.

REFERENCES


We suppose the disintegration of the home and the defeminization of mother are likely to take place any minute. (1920, August 29). [Cartoon] New York Tribune. Tennessee Virtual Archive. https://teva.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p15138coll27/id/785/rec/34