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Sparking Curiosity and Research Questions in the Archives through the Question Formulation Technique

Chloe Morse-Harding

Laura Hibbler

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CHLOE MORSE-HARDING AND LAURA HIBBLER

INTRODUCTION

Students are often excited when presented with archival materials, but many approach the materials without thinking about how they might be applied in their own research projects. Many students have had limited experiences using primary sources before starting college. Their experiences with primary sources might be limited to those introduced in a class, or in a book where the primary sources have been highly contextualized with secondary source content. As a result, students may find themselves in unfamiliar terrain when they are asked to examine primary sources without the same degree of contextualization. They may struggle to see how primary sources can serve as a springboard for developing their own original research questions.

INTRODUCING THE QUESTION FORMULATION TECHNIQUE

To address this challenge and engage students with archival materials, we—a Liaison Librarian and a Reference and Instruction Archivist—have applied the Question Formulation Technique in our teaching. The Question Formulation Technique, often shortened to the QFT, is an instructional technique which guides students in developing questions, improving upon those questions and identifying which questions they feel are important. The technique was developed by Dan Rothstein and Luz Santana, who have found that the QFT leads to improvements in learning and higher levels of student engagement (Right Question Institute, n.d.-a). Rothstein and Santana have written about the QFT in their book *Make Just One Change: Teach Students How to Ask Their Own Questions* (Harvard Education Press, 2011) and are also co-directors of the Right Question Institute. The Institute provides access to many QFT materials on its website (<http://rightquestion.org>), and we highly recommend that LOEX attendees and other instruction librarians visit the site and create a free account to learn more about this teaching technique. While freely available, many of the materials require an account to view, including some of the materials we have cited in this paper.

The QFT is a multi-step process, beginning with the Question Focus, or the QFocus, which serves as a springboard for students generating questions (Right Question Institute, n.d.-b). While the QFocus is often a topic or picture, we have modified the QFT so that we can engage students with archival materials. Due to the increased time needed when working with archival materials, we have lengthened the QFocus in order to give students extra time to explore and learn about the materials. To balance out the timing, we have removed one of the later steps of the QFT, the question categorization stage. Even without this stage, we have found that we are still able to achieve our learning objectives.

When we have modified the QFT for archival instruction, we have given students in small groups ten minutes to explore primary sources from one or more archival collections. After, students are given a set amount of time to generate as many questions as possible, without discussing, criticizing, responding to, or rephrasing any of the questions (Right Question Institute, n.d.-b). Students can brainstorm questions that spark their curiosity, without worrying about whether their questions are “good enough,” or if they are the right questions or the perfect questions. After students have generated their questions, we ask each group to select a question from their list that they think would be an effective research question. Each group is invited to share information about their archival collection with the rest of the class and to tell their classmates about the research question they have chosen.

While their questions may start as basic sourcing of their documents, students begin to ask more sophisticated questions that demonstrate a higher level of thinking over the course of the exercise. This process of question formulation allows students to develop the critical thinking skills necessary to analyze primary sources. By questioning those sources and demonstrating an understanding of historical empathy and biases, students begin the process of research as inquiry and recognize how they might apply these sources in their own original research.

INTERACTIVE DEMONSTRATION OF THE QFT AT LOEX

For our LOEX 2019 workshop, we provided a brief overview of the QFT and described how we have modified the technique for archival instruction. We then explained that the LOEX session was based on a session we had taught for a history course called *Global 1968: Student and Youth Revolutions*; LOEX participants were asked to take on the role of students in this class. While the class was looking at social movements around the world in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the professor was thrilled to be able to incorporate materials from the Brandeis University Archives & Special Collections into the course. Our University Archives & Special Collections department includes material related to student movements and relevant events both on the Brandeis University campus and throughout the United States from the time period. The material that we chose for the class reflects the social shifts that took place during the time period. For our LOEX 2019 workshop, Chloe made facsimiles of all materials used in the class so that participants could have a similar experience. When we hold classes on campus, students are usually given the actual physical items or documents with which to work.

For the QFocus, LOEX workshop participants were divided into groups of three and given ten minutes to review the sources and discuss the items as a group. Student newsletters, photographs, redacted FBI files, and political pamphlets were among some of the formats participants were asked to review. Once the ten minutes had passed, we called the participants back together as a group to introduce the next step the QFT, introducing the rules for producing questions. In *Make Just One Change: Teach Students How to Ask Their Own Questions*, Rothstein and Santana (2011) state the following rules to guide students:

- Ask as many questions as you can.
- Do not stop to discuss, judge, or answer any questions.
- Write down every question exactly as it is stated.
- Change any statement into a question. (Quoted from Rothstein & Santana, 2011, Chapter 3: Introduce the rules for producing questions: An exercise in metacognition.)

After we introduced these rules, each group worked together again for ten minutes to generate a list of as many questions as they could. Once the ten minutes had passed, we asked participants to move onto the next step of the QFT, prioritizing questions (Right Question Institute, n.d.-b). During this step, groups were asked to take two minutes to review their list of questions and then choose one that they thought could be an effective research question. Once they had made their selection, each group was given the opportunity to introduce their material and share their research question. After the groups presented, we noted that groups started their lists with basic sourcing questions before they moved on to more sophisticated questions, much as our students did when we taught the instruction session last spring.

As an example from our instruction session with students from the *Global 1968: Student and Youth Revolutions* class, one group had looked at materials related to George Wallace's campaign for the presidency. Their initial questions were factual questions about when Wallace ran for president and his opponents. As students progressed, their questions began to reflect higher-level thinking, asking, for example, about the level of student support for Wallace and why students may have supported him. Another group of students had looked at documents from the National Student Strike Information Center at Brandeis University and started by asking why all the materials shared the same date. (This particular collection is arranged chronologically, so their group happened to have been given a folder of items from that date, as opposed to another arbitrarily selected date.) However, the group also progressed to ask more sophisticated questions about how students from different universities organized and worked together during the late 1960s.

The last two stages of the QFT involve discussing the next steps and participants considering what they have learned (Right Question Institute, n.d.-b). In a classroom setting, we usually ask students to reflect on their experiences using the QFT and how they might be able to apply what they have learned to their upcoming research assignment. Depending on the length of the class, we might also spend some time demonstrating databases and asking students to think about how they might be able to use their questions to identify relevant secondary source materials.

During our LOEX session, we asked participants to reflect on their experience using the QFT, and to share ways in which it could be applied to their own instruction sessions using either library or archival materials. We had positive feedback from participants at our session, with one noting that she was excited to work with the local historical society in the future to develop sessions integrating the technique.

CONCLUSION

Through experiencing the QFT in archival instruction, students are empowered to take on the role of a researcher in the archives. In a low-stress environment, they are able to brainstorm solid research questions without over-analyzing their questions or worrying about whether or not their questions are “good enough.” Although their questions may start out as basic sourcing, these are questions students might have to answer during the course of their research. These questions are also valuable building blocks for the higher-level questions that lead to thoughtful and successful research questions and serve as the starting point for original research with archival materials.

From our experience using the QFT in teaching, we have found that students sharpen their analytical skills and develop a strong desire to learn more about their materials. After their instruction session in the archives, students can use the questions they have developed as a starting point when pursuing their research projects. Alternatively, if a student chooses to focus on a different topic for an individual research project, the student can then apply the QFT experience of generating questions to the process of analyzing a different set of primary sources.

We have found that students become engaged with archival materials through the QFT. We see each student begin to take on the role of scholar, asking their own original research questions. We have used this technique in a variety of instruction sessions with both undergraduate and graduate students. Feedback from both faculty and students has been positive, with students reporting that they feel excited about using primary sources for their research and that the QFT is a technique they can use to prepare for future assignments.

REFERENCES

Right Question Institute. (n.d.-a) About RQI: Publications. Retrieved from <https://rightquestion.org/about/publications/>

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