Teaching Primary Source Research Skills
to 21st-Century Learners

By Julie Thomas. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2024. 222 pp. Paperback. $49.00. ISBN 978-958954-06-5.

Almost immediately in her introduction, Julie Thomas explains that her book *Teaching Primary Source Research Skills to 21st-Century Learners* "focuses on teaching primary source research skills—not on teaching with or about primary sources" (p. 1). Readers can take this as a promise that is carried throughout the book's six chapters. As she mentions in an interview shortly after the book went to market, it is a move from "with" and "about" to "how."[1] "How" includes consideration of a variety of competencies drawing on already-existing sources. The book aims to set itself apart from other guidelines or texts on integrating primary source literacy because it focuses on two areas: primary source research skills (PSRS) and elements specific to the twenty-first-century learner. As Thomas writes, "Twenty-first-century learners expect to receive education that is diverse, equitable, and inclusionary, and PSRS instruction demands it" (p. 5).

Thomas's intended audience includes educators across disciplines, those who would like to be able to identify specific areas of PSRS instruction aligned with their curricular needs as well as those who are looking for guidance about instruction pedagogy and strategy (p. 5). Instruction strategy is an area that Thomas seems to wish was more integrated earlier on in her career teaching PSRS, based on her responses in the same interview mentioned. She explains that her "first ten years of teaching one-shot classes about primary source research were frustrating" because she felt that she was failing to effectively teach *research skills* and that "there is a dearth of guidance about *how* to teach students to understand, evaluate, and use primary sources."[2] This books aims to remedy that gap in guidance.

Chapter 1, "How to Teach Primary Source Research Skills," is meant to define PSRS as well as discuss what defines a twenty-first-century learner. The chapter also provides a thorough review of organizations, guidelines, and educational programs pertaining to teaching with primary sources, including of course *Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy* (GPSL).[3] While Thomas summarizes these sources in this first chapter, she also includes in the appendix full-text copies of five related guidelines (which were all released or revised between 2016 and 2020), as well as a seven-page list of suggested readings. Together with the bibliography and index, the appendixes take up roughly fifty pages, or a quarter, of the book.

An important section in chapter 1 is "Defining 21st-Century Learning," where Thomas discusses both learning and learners. Thomas underscores that the term 21st-century learner "is more than a descriptor of students who began their

education in the current century" and that "the brains of today's learners work differently than those of any time before them" (p. 20). To visualize the unique qualities of twenty-first-century learners, Thomas offers a side-by-side comparison between "19th–20th Century Learning," which emphasized "content mastery," and "21st-Century Learning," which focuses on "process skills" (p. 23). Much of this section is a resharing of others' offerings—she has clearly mined the literature—but it provides a solid background. The emphasis is on the learner—how they learn and what they bring to the learning space—but Thomas also asserts that "digital immigrant instructors" need to grasp the digital literacies of the twenty-first century to meet "digital natives" where they are. I appreciated her acknowledgment that doing so can sometimes be "aspirational" in reality, especially with limited time and resources, and her suggested solutions to meet this aspirational challenge, including fostering partnerships with other instructors as well as students outside of the class-room (p. 28). The relationship between "digital natives" and "digital immigrants" is not a new idea—I remember exploring this relationship almost twenty years ago during research for an article I coauthored about the changing landscape of archival reference and outreach.[4] However, Thomas situates the relationship in the context of not merely reference and outreach but specifically digital literacy and competencies of learners and teachers.

What must a teacher understand to be an effective PSRS instructor to twenty-first-century learners? Thomas aims to answer that question in chapters 2 and 3. In chapter 2, she provides a solid overview of multiple literacies, competencies, and educational theories to address "one of the most important gaps in guidance for learning how to be an effective PSRS instructor" (p. 33). This chapter is quite dense. She opens by reviewing sixteen literacies, suggesting that only nine require an "advanced" or "expert" level of mastery, while the remaining require only familiarity. Something I have never done myself but Thomas does in this section is to review the interplay between the *Framework for Information Literacy in Higher Education* (FILHE) and the GPSL + PSRS. As an academic librarian archivist who is part of a team for which FILHE is a core reference, Thomas's comparison is useful to me, and I will likely return to it. Thomas then examines competencies (twelve in total) and provides an overview of general educational theories and methodologies. Readers will see a lot of overlap between "literacies" and "competencies." Thomas emphasizes the importance of active learning for PSRS, and I found her inclusion of STEM competencies refreshing, as I do not often think about teaching primary source literacy and research skills outside of the humanities.

Chapter 3 discusses various pedagogies and teaching strategies and provides numerous examples. Readers, Thomas suggests, can avoid becoming overwhelmed by the variety of pedagogical approaches by starting slowly and integrating com-ponents as needed (p. 95). In this chapter, she coins the concepts "static instruc-tional tools" (noninteractive ways and means to supplement instruction, p. 87) and

"dynamic instructional tools" (teaching aids that require the active participation of students, p. 88) and pushes against, what in my experience are, mainstays of library and archival instruction. For example, she criticizes the use of "static" tools such as LibGuides, physical handouts, and curated sites of primary sources. Her critique gives readers something to ponder in terms of how we might include such tools alongside more active learning strategies to meet twenty-first-century objectives. Thomas's point is that alone, static tools are not effective for nurturing PSRS and must be accompanied by more dynamic and active approaches.

Chapters 4 and 5 focus on assessment and outreach. Thomas's approach throughout the book is to acknowledge different challenges inherent in PSRS instruction, with commentary on how instructors might reframe and meet each challenge. She addresses assessment challenges on page 99, after which she thoroughly breaks down different types and dimensions of assessment with explanations of their benefits, drawing on the literature. This chapter would be just as useful to those who are experienced with various assessment strategies as it would to someone getting started with implementing assessment in their teaching. Thomas notes that "the golden rule is that some assessment is better than no assessment at all" (p. 123). Her chapter on outreach is also filled with various types and examples. Outreach is meant to be such a core aspect of any archival general programming, and so it is important that Thomas ties her examples specifically to the success of PSRS instruction programs. Thomas concludes with a chapter called "Looking Forward" in which she takes the time to summarize again why expanding basic teaching of primary source literacy into teaching PSRS is important and what more remains to be done (pp.145–46).

It is worth mentioning that this book is US-centric. While Thomas makes an effort to distinguish old frameworks—for example, the twentieth-century learner is not the same as the twenty-first-century learner—she does not discuss in this book how or whether the twenty-first-century learner description carries across different global spaces. Is there such a thing as a universal learner, or does context (such as cultural context, geographical context, and language context) influence PSRS instruction and the competencies we as instructors are meant to study and put into practice? Although not directly addressed in the book, in the interview mentioned earlier Thomas says she is "excited to see studies taking place in other countries such as Greece, Sweden, Turkey, England, Malaysia, Norway, Germany, the Netherlands, Barbados, Chile, Nigeria, and Mumbai" and hopes her book will help raise awareness of the need for instructors to become effective teachers of PSRS in the United States.[5]

Overall, I had hoped that Thomas's book would offer something different than what I have already encountered in other books about primary source instruction, and my hope was met. Thomas brings into the conversation many relevant ideas and frameworks outside of the GPSL, which as an archivist I tend to lean into as

the core text for guidance. Thomas's book is not necessarily the text to consult for ideas about activities and lesson plans, as it is heavier on theories and methodologies than on case studies, even though examples are integrated throughout the narratives. But I believe this is exactly her point—a plethora of examples and case studies about teaching with primary sources already exists. Combining this book with a look at different case studies—using it as a "jumping off point" as Thomas intends[6] —would be highly recommended for those hoping to develop a full understanding and foundation of primary source teaching and learning.

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Notes

[1] Savannah Tiffany, "Interview with Julie Thomas—Author of *Teaching Primary Source Research Skills to 21st-Century Learners*," *Archival Outlook* (July/August 2024): 8, https://mydigitalpublication.com/publication/?i=827411&p=10&view=issueViewer.

[2] Tiffany, "Interview with Julie Thomas," 8.

[3] The *Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy*, developed by the SAA-ACRL/RBMS Joint Task Force on the Development of Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy (JTF-PSL) and released in 2018, has become a significant and central reference and resource for archivists and others who engage in teaching with primary sources. For example, the SAA case studies series Teaching with Primary Sources invites authors to address specific components from the GPSL, https://www2.archivists.org/standards/guidelines-for-primary-source-literacy.

[4] Laura Botts and Lauren Kata, "Are the Digital Natives Restless? Reaching Out to the Ne(x)t Generation," *Provenance: Journal of the Society of Georgia Archivists* 24, no. 1 (2006), https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/provenance/vol24/iss1/2.

[5] Tiffany, "Interview with Julie Thomas," 9.

[6] Tiffany, "Interview with Julie Thomas," 8.