

UC Berkeley

Courses

Title

Archiving as Social Justice Practice | Summer 2022 Studio Course

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3tx0n16c>

Author

Global Urban Humanities and Future Histories Lab

Publication Date

2022-07-01

HUMANITIES 132 /
ENVIRONMENTAL DESIGN 132

ARCHIVING AS SOCIAL JUSTICE PRACTICE

FUTURE HISTORIES LAB
UNDERGRADUATE
URBAN HUMANITIES
STUDIO COURSE



WHY READ THIS CASE STUDY?

Undergraduates often do not carry out independent archival research until they take upper-division courses, if at all. What would be the impact of introducing incoming freshmen, particularly students who are the first in their families to attend college, to the joys and challenges of handling archival documents?

In *Archiving as Social Justice Practice*, professional archivist Lincoln Cushing taught students not just to use archives but to help create them. Following field trips to the storied archives of the Bancroft Library at UC Berkeley as well as to community-based archives, students helped process materials that became part of the Freedom Archives, a long-established grassroots archive in Berkeley. They handled, selected, and digitized historic protest posters and attached metadata, learning important concepts about the practice of history in the process.

The course was supported by Future Histories Lab and offered as part of the Summer Bridge program, which welcomes students from diverse

backgrounds, including students of color, low-income, and first-generation students to the college experience in the summer before their freshman fall semester. In their reflections offered in this case study, students said the experience changed the course of their undergraduate careers.

Students who were not even sure they were allowed inside the Bancroft gained the confidence to feel that university resources were theirs. STEM-oriented students gained an understanding of the importance of the humanities; humanities students began to understand history as a discipline; and students oriented toward activism connected their concerns for the future with an appreciation for the need to understand the past.

Keywords:

Archives, community archives, public history, first-generation students, activism, visual culture, project-based learning, interdisciplinary studies.

This case study is part of an archive of the UC Berkeley Global Urban Humanities Initiative and its Future Histories Lab, supported by the Mellon Foundation. The entire archive, including course case studies, faculty and student reflections, digital projects, symposia, exhibitions, and publications, is available at https://escholarship.org/uc/ucb_guh_fhl.

CONTENTS

4 COURSE DESCRIPTION

5 INSTRUCTOR

6 COURSE SUMMARY

9 SEMESTER MAP

15 STUDENT REFLECTIONS

COURSE DESCRIPTION

ARCHIVING AS SOCIAL JUSTICE PRACTICE

*FUTURE HISTORIES LAB
UNDERGRADUATE URBAN HUMANITIES
STUDIO COURSE*



Humanities 132 / Environmental Design 132

3 Units, Summer 2022 and Summer 2023 (offered twice)

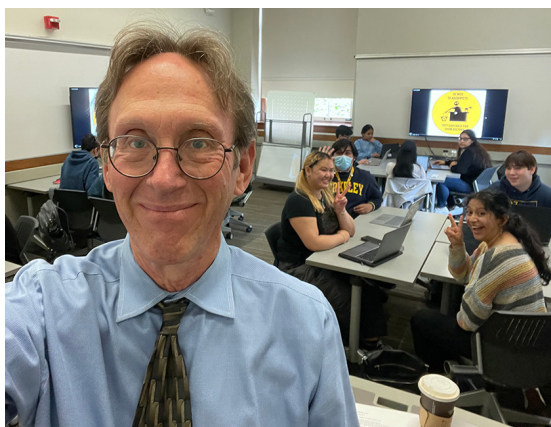
Summer Bridge Program

Instructor:

Lincoln Cushing (Humanities)

In this course, students explored how archival practices support social justice scholarship. Archives run the gamut from small personal collections to major institutions. Students studied several special collections built by and for activists, reviewed their missions and processes, and learned about the role that archival practice plays in the building of knowledge. They worked with a community organization to digitize and catalog their collection of posters and other documents, to research the history behind them, and make this archive available online to the public. As case studies, students investigated the Center for the Study of Political Graphics (Los Angeles), the Interference Archive (Brooklyn), the Freedom Archives (San Francisco), and Docs Populi / Documents for the Public (Berkeley).

THE INSTRUCTOR



Lincoln Cushing

Lincoln Cushing has at various times been a printer, artist, archivist, author, U.C. Berkeley librarian, and instructor. He is involved in numerous efforts to document, catalog, and disseminate oppositional political culture of the late 20th century. His books include *Revolucion! Cuban Poster Art* (2003), *Visions of Peace & Justice: 30 Years of Political Posters from the Archives of Inkworks Press* (2007), *Chinese Posters: Art from the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution* (2007), *Agitate! Educate! Organize! - American Labor Posters* (2009), and an essay in *Ten Years That Shook The City — San Francisco 1968-1978* (2011). He was guest curator for the 2012 exhibition *All Of Us Or None — Poster Art of the San Francisco Bay Area* at the Oakland Museum of California and author of a catalog by the same title.

COURSE SUMMARY

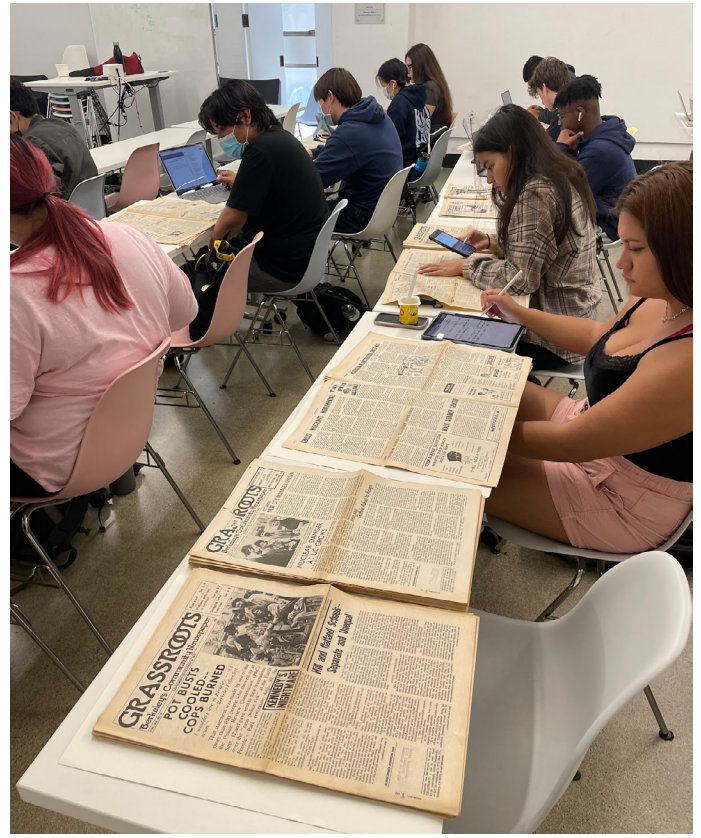
CONTEXT

“Looking back, immediately behind us is dead ground. We don’t see it, and because we don’t see it, there is no period so remote as the recent past. The historian’s job is to anticipate what our perspective of that period will be.” - Professor Irwin in ‘The History Boys,’ 2006.

In this project-based, community-engaged course, students learned what history is made of. We learned about the role of conventional and community-based archives and how such institutions support creative and productive scholarship through the provision of primary sources. Knowledge is a moving target - we are surrounded by news, facts, and opinions that often lack true supporting evidence. This course looked at the role of archives and special collections in helping us, and our communities, to better formulate an honest world view.

Although some archives and special collections are well-known, many more serve marginalized or specialized audiences and require extra effort to reveal them in the landscape of knowledge sources. Through site visits and online research students examined the pros and cons of different repositories. Together, we learned that there is an enormous amount of material that helps us understand history that has never been put online. Students learned how to find, analyze, and organize materials such as posters, menus, brochures and other ephemera that can be important sources in the writing of history.

Students were not only users of archives, but contributors. We challenged the notion that history is neutral and the sole product of established academic scholars. The centerpiece of this course was engagement with a community partner, the Freedom Archives, one of several collections presented in the class which offer unconventional and nontraditional research settings. Working with the Freedom Archives, we learned archival processes and techniques designed to serve the students well in their undergraduate career and beyond.



The course was offered to incoming freshmen as part of the Summer Bridge program, which serves diverse students including students of color, low-income students, and students who are the first in their families to attend college. Students said the course changed the course of their undergraduate careers, giving them greater confidence, a sense that they belonged on campus, and an understanding that their studies could relate to their lives.

Students visited both university and community archives and helped expand a community-based archive by digitizing and attaching metadata to new assets.



Students enjoyed the sensory experience of handling archival materials such as these posters from the Ann Tompkins collection spread out on the Cushing dining room table. Some posters had been tightly rolled for more than thirty years.

SEMESTER MAP

ARC OF THE SEMESTER

WEEK 1- WHAT ARE ARCHIVES FOR?

SESSION 1

- Welcome to class, review of course, student self-introductions.
- Overview of archives, libraries, special collections, as well as, archival tools and techniques.
- Questions we explored: What are primary sources and why do they matter? How do we show evidence to support what we “know”?
- Fieldwork #1 - Architecture of the archive: buildings and digital structures. Visit a UC Berkeley special collection and identify an “analog-only” (non-digitized) item that interests you.

SESSION 2

- Discuss reading responses.
- Questions we explored: How does cataloging add to knowledge-building? Why are primary source materials helpful in advancing knowledge? Can you come up with contemporary examples of “fake news” or sloppy research?
- Overview of archival practice and tools, using primary sources to develop critical thinking.
- Classroom workshop #1: Cushing brought in several boxes of social movement flyers. Groups of three students picked a folder that appeals to them and after discussing and reviewing contents selected three representative samples to digitize. Cushing guided group in running documents through scanner and drop files to student laptops. Group then divided up scans, each student added relevant metadata, and group collaboratively wrote a sample finding aid to folder contents. Class then looked at results and discussed.
- Preparation for the field trip to Freedom Archives – students looked at their website and familiarized themselves with their collection and services. <https://freedomarchives.org>

WEEK 2- WHAT DOES AN ARCHIVE LOOK LIKE?

SESSION 3

- Field trip #1 to Freedom Archives showed us how an independent community-based institutional special collection is set up and gave us an opportunity to talk with staff.
- Students wrote a 400-word response on the field trip.

SESSION 4

- Students discussed the field trip with each other.
- Questions we explored: What feature did you find most useful about Freedom Archives? How does an institution such as Freedom Archives compare to an institutional archive such as the Bancroft Library? For mapping archives in cities, where are non-academic archives and special collections held in the San Francisco Bay Area? In the US? Assign reading #2.
- We prepared for classroom workshop #2, where students were expected to bring four items (book, photo, tool, etc.) for which students together created an original item-level catalog records and a finding aid for the “collection.”



Students visiting the Freedom Archives.

SESSION 5

- Questions we explored: How do personal and cultural biases distort institutional descriptions of reality? How can these errors be changed or worked around?
- Classroom workshop #2: Cataloging is the process of identifying key aspects of items in a collection to better interpret it and assist finding it later. Students clustered into groups of three, where each student brought in four items to archive. The groups set up an account in CatalogIt for this temporary group, and uploaded all images of their items. Each item was named to identify it in the catalog and followed the “NEXT” step to place it in the catalog structure offered by the application, and saved the item. Students reviewed their dozen group items one by one, and populated its metadata.
- Digital tool used: CatalogIt online free personal version.
- Discussion question after the workshop: How do the items selected relate to each other? Why were those catalog fields chosen? What challenges arose?

WEEK 3- HOW ARE ARCHIVES BUILT?

SESSION 6

- Field trip #2 to instructor’s Docs Populi archive.
- We saw how an independent community-based special collection is set up. Together we observed the advantages and disadvantages of non-institutional archives.
- Students wrote a 400-word response on this week’s field trip.



SESSION 7

- We discuss our impressions of field trip #2.
- Questions we explored: How would you describe this special collection compared to others? Consider size, scope, quality of holdings, range of content, and accessibility.
- Classroom workshop #3: Students used their phones to record a 5-minute statement about how long their family has lived in California. The instructor ran the audiofiles through an online transcription service, then each student reviewed another’s text and corrected or confirmed it. The whole class discussed the process.

SESSION 8

- Field trip #3 to the Bancroft Library (UC Berkeley).
- The Bancroft Library is one of the best special collections in the country, yet is sometimes perceived as elite and inaccessible. This visit offered an overview of the range of materials available and how to make the best use of this resource.
- Students wrote a 400-word response on the fieldtrip.



WEEK 4- WHAT KINDS OF ARCHIVES ARE OUT THERE?

SESSION 9

- Guest lecturer #1- Lisbet Tellefsen, independent community archivist.
- The guest lecturer showed that you don't have to be an academic to contribute to building historical knowledge. Ms. Tellefsen has followed her passion for social justice and over the years built several major collections.

SESSION 10

- We discussed the outcomes of our fieldwork assignment #1 and our impressions of the Bancroft Library.
- Fieldwork questions we explored: Which special collection did you visit? How would you evaluate the physical space and location? What analog-only item did you find and why was it important?
- Bancroft Library questions we explored: How would you describe this special collection compared to others? Consider size, scope, quality of holdings, range of content, and accessibility.
- Other questions we explored: What are the political and personal challenges of capturing controversial community history for the future? What are some techniques for assuring that archival materials will not be disrespectfully interpreted or used? What roles do collecting/curating/cataloging play in building knowledge?

SESSION 11

- Together, we checked in on personal archive assignments.
- Questions we explored: What examples did you find? How did you determine a precise or approximate date when creating the archive item's entry?
- Classroom workshop #4: Catalog records can contain errors and omissions. Students looked through the All Of Us Or None online poster archive hosted by the Oakland Museum of California. This collection can be seen [here](#). Students found and selected 5 items that have missing dates, and identified an actual or approximate year of publication using online research tools such as a newspaper archive and reverse calendar. Corrected dates were submitted for entry in the OMCA catalog and addressed the question of how to determine a precise or approximate date?

WEEK 5- HOW DO YOU CREATE AN ONLINE ARCHIVE?

SESSION 12

- Guest lecturer #2- Nathaniel Moore, field trip to UCB Ethnic Studies Library.
- Nathaniel is an archivist with The Freedom Archives and UC Berkeley's Ethnic Studies Library, and is deeply committed to using special collections as a tool for community empowerment.

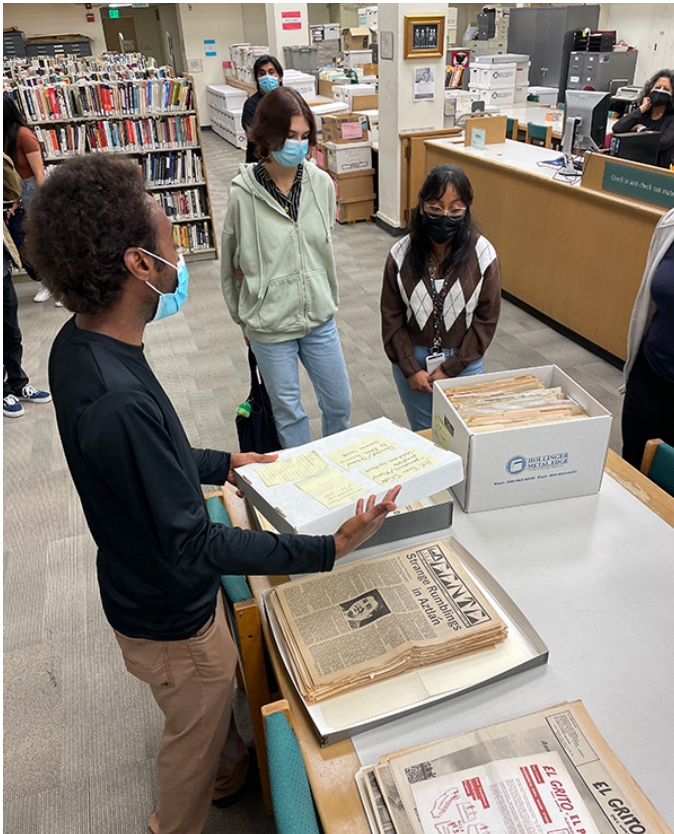
SESSION 13

- We discussed learnings from the guest lecturer. Discussion topics included: How does a special collection such as ESL fit into the constellation of UC libraries? Of other "ethnic" libraries?



Students examined the roles that collecting, curating, and cataloging play in building knowledge.

Guest lecturer Lisbet Tellefsen, an independent community archivist, showed that you don't have to be an academic to contribute to building historical knowledge. Ms. Tellefsen has followed her passion for social justice and over the years built several major collections.



- Classroom workshop #5: Working in groups of four, students worked together on a GoogleSites website in which they presented the archival materials they are organizing by looking at the large shared monitor. Students critiqued each other's designs and came up with a consensus website design.

SESSION 14

- We took our second field trip to Freedom Archives to discuss group archive project progress and received feedback.

WEEK 6- WE FINISHED AND REFLECTED ON OUR HOME-GROWN ARCHIVE

SESSION 15

- Questions we explored: How does evolving technology help, or hurt, archival efforts? What are the advantages and disadvantages of privately-held or small-scale community archives?
- Our final group archive project summarized the Grassroots newspaper collection being donated to Freedom Archives. Each student was assigned one issue of the paper to review and write a 100-word item-level description. In addition, each student wrote a 500-word finding aid (describing the whole collection). These were shared and discussed in class, resulting in a single group-edited version to go to FA. We explore how each of our research efforts added value to the item being described.

SESSION 16

- We reviewed our group archive project presented on class web page.
- Questions we explored: Does the web page accurately show the relationship between C-132 students and community partner archive? Does the site encourage viewers to want to learn more about the materials shared and additional content at FA?
- We had a final written reflection on what students have learned in this class. What parts of the course were helpful to you? Which ones were confusing or irrelevant? Do you feel that this better prepares you for a successful path through college?

SESSION 17

- We reviewed how the class went, suggestions for improvement, celebrate our mutual experience.

STUDENT REFLECTIONS

Freedom Archives Field Trip

“How many people can truly say that they have heard what motivational voices sound like coming over a recording that is almost 3-5 decades old? This truly inspires students and shows them that history over a recording or an important newsletter is so much more than what meets the eye; it is a moment which many should cherish, because it is our history that is monumental.”

-Marisa

“After experiencing and stepping foot into an actual archive I’ve come to realize their significance. At first glance it can seem like a plain establishment that houses stuff from past decades that people want to get rid of, but after having the opportunity to be taught and learn more about the actual process that goes into archiving I’ve come to really enjoy and appreciate what archivists do.”

-Vannessa

“The field trip can only be described as one of the most impactful experiences for me personally. I’ve always thought of myself as someone who aligns more on the left side of politics but trying to find resources online has always proven to be difficult, draining, and arduous. I have never seen such a rich catalog of the same “radical” ideas that provoked me to rethink the structure of society. I think seeing how much pure information and knowledge there is in just one time period and social movement can only be described as mind-boggling.”

-Pedro

Bancroft Library Field Trip

“I had the privilege of being able to visit one of the most informative libraries. I never would have guessed that I would actually have had the opportunity to go into that building even though I pass it every morning. As I walk by it every morning, I always wondered what it was like to know that building or what it really looked like inside. Now my wonders have been put to rest and I can truly say I enjoyed the experience that was presented to me.”

-Marisa

“Looking at Bancroft from the outside is intimidating and the fact that it’s not a regular library where you can go inside, pick up items, and check them out, contributes to the intimidation factor. However going in and seeing the different posters laid out from different times, going back to the 1870’s even was really interesting... the fact we can use the material at all is amazing and I will definitely be using it during the four years for research or simply to casually browse and find something interesting to read.”

-Vannessa

Docs Populi Archive Field Trip

“The archive is after all in the instructor’s home, so he probably can’t let just anyone inside. However, this is counteracted by the fact that instructor Cushing is not simply collecting the materials but also digitally archiving them. This means that even someone in another continent could ask him through an email to receive high quality images of a poster and he would be able to provide them.”

-Alejandro

“While many might describe the space as small, I actually really liked this aspect as it made the archive feel more personal...permitting the viewers (better described as guests), to hear the owner convey their true intentions and interest of their personal collection. Unlike a museum, it felt more homey from the wood to the ambient lighting I truly felt like I was walking among the memories from the past.”

-Citlali

“I don’t think that I have words to describe the emotions I felt going to your house and seeing the special collection. I knew your collection of social justice posters was big, but I did not expect it to be so nice and preserved the way that it was. I was in awe of everything that I saw today. Your collection is just so unique and I could tell that you care deeply for your passion and you do it for the community and to keep the culture of archiving alive. This special collection is unique in the sense that it focuses mainly on posters dealing with social justice, as other collections could focus on other areas such as politics or specialize in another area of archives.”

-Ernesto

“As a young person in this extremely unfamiliar kingdom of adulthood I am constantly asking myself: How do I use my action and voice to perpetuate a community of peace? Seeing so much wrong in the institutions and civilizations we put our faith into becomes overwhelming quickly. When I observed your social justice catalog I felt a rush of hope—truly I have never seen something so amazing. As an ex-graffiti writer and someone with a niche interest in stylistic design, I was so excited to see that being coupled with social change. I found it comforting to see evidence of humans’ generational fight for their rights. In this class I want to know more about how I can use archives as a way to inspire my actions now!”

-Diego

Final reflections on class

“This class has made me realize the importance of archiving in both my personal and school life. I had never thought of places like libraries as archives, but now that I have completed this course and look back I realize that libraries are probably one of the most important archives in the world. They not only store important information and materials that would probably be lost if it weren’t for them, but they also catalog and archive the materials so that they aren’t just randomly dispersed throughout the shelves of the library, making it impossible to find what you need.”

-Alejandro

“I first chose archiving because it seemed like a cool class. Given its name I knew it was going to touch upon social justice issues and I was right. It was an experience given it was my first time taking a college class, yet it was one of the best decisions I made. A lot of people I met complained about their classes and how boring or difficult they were while I had no complaints of mine. I learned a lot of interesting things that I had previously given little thought to. I’m an avid reader so libraries are like a home and it was cool to think and learn about all the grunt and background work that goes into preparing an archive for use to the public.

-Vanessa

“This [course] has definitely prepared me for a better/more successful future as this university is dedicated to research. It was very different in the sense that it was very practical and hand-ons in comparison to the usual classes which are theoretical and textbook heavy. I think that’s what made me excited at times to come to class. The knowledge that it wouldn’t just be used by students reading on a page and memorizing the terms but actually learning how these terms affect us in real life/ at the moment.”

-Citlali

“Thank you to all of the resources I have been exposed to and thank you to all of the new things I can take away with me in to my future. I have truly found a new sense of voice and feel my mind opening to different outlooks. I can now see why we as young people are the future and why it is so important for us to find our voice and use the proper history provided to back up our newfound knowledge.”

-Marisa

"I feel like this course will help me not only towards my major (Conservation and Resource Studies) through collecting sources and knowing that archives are there to be used but also with my own passion for social justice and how I can apply these teachings to my own work."

-Armando

"This course has been extremely inspiring from an activist's point of view. Seeing how anyone can catalog real history with relative ease inspired me to create my own collection. Although it is far from the archival standard and I haven't begun digitizing anything, it's been really fun to collect social posters, propaganda, and flyers, and adding minimal metadata."

-Diego

"This course is unusual, especially for a lot of us in more STEM-based majors with no correlation to these types of classes. I now know how to keep my physical as well as digital assets organized."

-Kaden

"This course was very laid back, which I really enjoyed, it made the transition from high school to college much easier. The different and many field trips were very fun to take and I enjoyed a lot of the hands-on projects that we were able to do."

-Kou

"This course is hands-on and teaches concepts and practices usually not taught in K-12 schools. It's an eye-opening, fun class that I am very happy to have been a part of!"

-Alisa

"I did not know you could reserve a special collection for research purposes nor did I know the process of making that happen. The terms non-circulating and bound books were unfamiliar to me before taking this class. I didn't even know the existence of finding aids. With the information I've learned from this class, I hope my community and those I interact with learn from my experience of knowing that there are great sources out there to learn about history."

-Leslie



HUMANITIES 132 /
ENVIRONMENTAL DESIGN 132