

Creating a new type of e-textbook: *Using Primary Sources*

As my role as General Editor of the open access e-textbook *Using Primary Sources: a practical guide for students* comes to an end after three years, this article is a chance to reflect on the project, and to think about the future of e-textbook publishing.¹ I helped co-ordinate this e-textbook project, combining the efforts of academics, librarians, publishers and software designers. The e-textbook will be wide-ranging, accessible and practically focused. Over 30 historians from the UK and the USA have written nearly 30 thematic chapters. The first version launched in January 2017, with more chapters being added throughout the year. This seems like a good moment to sum up how the project started, how it progressed, how we see the resource fitting into our teaching in the months ahead, and how we might sum up our experience of creating an e-textbook.

Introduction

From the beginning, we knew that this would be a different kind of textbook. I had been considering for a while the idea of creating a teaching text that offered more practical advice to students than was currently available. Authors would write thematic chapters which could be used across a range of teaching modules, drawing upon relevant primary source materials. In 2014, just before I was going to propose the book to a publisher, I heard about the University of Liverpool's (LUP's) intention to respond to the Jisc call for projects to explore the 'institution as e-textbook creator', and was encouraged to pitch the idea to LUP.² They suggested that we host the book, and digitized primary source materials from the University's Special Collections and Archives, on the BiblioBoard digital platform. BiblioBoard is primarily a flexible community engagement tool for libraries, allowing patrons to upload and display digitized materials in a user-friendly fashion.³ We quickly put a proposal together for this innovative open access publication.

Once we learned of the successful bid, we confirmed the team of 31 authors, and started to plan the project. We formed a core group of five people working between the University of Liverpool Library, LUP and academic staff. Andrew Barker has written on the early development of *Using Primary Sources*,⁴ so I will discuss how the project progressed, a number of things that we learned along the way, and how useful we hope the resource will be for students.

The project

Within the space of a few weeks, an initial idea had grown and gained funding, thus committing us to a slightly formidable three-year project. From the start, we knew that we had to plan as much as possible. We decided to create a prescriptive template for the 7,000-word chapters, which we hoped would ensure some continuity of focus, emphasize practical advice and make the job of authors (and editors!) easier. In the end, this allowed a smoother editorial process further down the line: we certainly found that it is important to be as prescriptive as possible with authors regarding the structure of their work, without being too prescriptive in terms of the content that they offer. Each chapter ends by suggesting ways students might use primary source materials in their coursework.



JONATHAN HOGG

Senior Lecturer
University of
Liverpool

'From the beginning, we knew that this would be a different kind of textbook'

54 We also developed a process so that we could work with authors to identify and then digitize library materials, upload materials on to BiblioBoard and then hyperlink chapters to source materials. This sounds like a relatively simple process but, to begin with, it was time consuming and complicated due to the fact that our team was learning about the intricacies of BiblioBoard, trying to develop a consistent method of entering bibliographic information, chasing up copyright queries, and making a whole host of design and editorial decisions. Like any edited publication, the submission of authored work has been staggered, which means the work on the project has had to be quite fragmented. Keeping track of the status of all the chapters can be challenging! (See Figures 1 and 2 for a feeling of the content.)



Figure 1. The textbook is in three volumes: Medieval, Early Modern and Modern

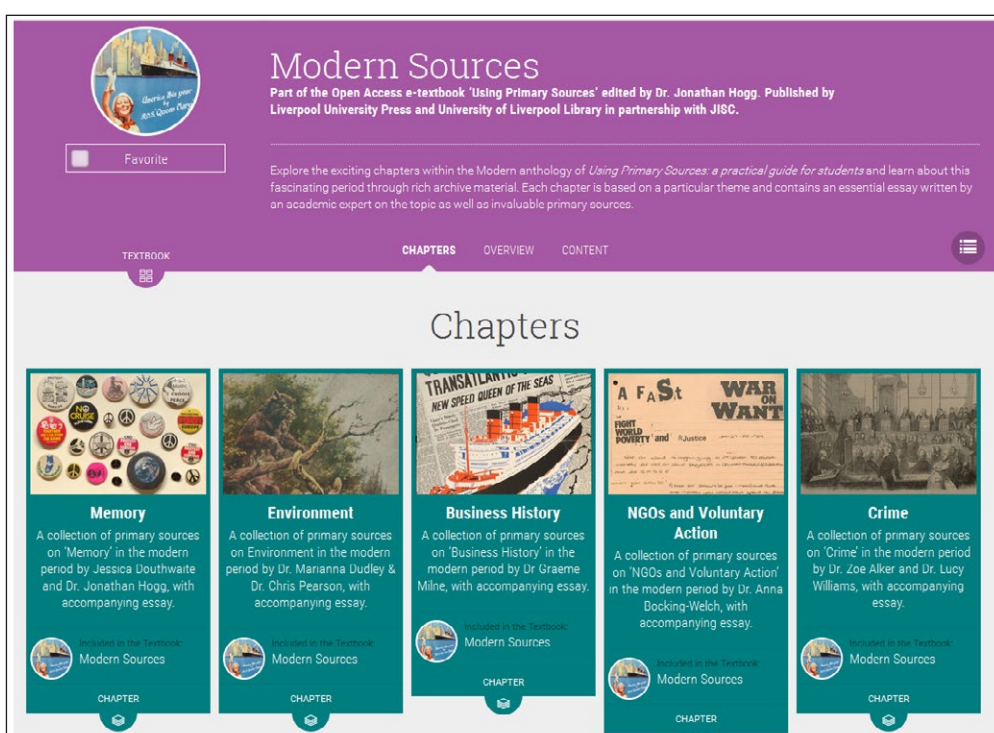


Figure 2. Within anthologies, chapters are based on a variety of themes

We worked hard with BiblioBoard to create the e-textbook that we envisioned. They have been very good working partners, helping us to create bespoke features: for example, they created a new type of hyperlink between our chapters and the primary sources (Figures 3 and 4).⁵ The possibilities that the platform has offered us are impressive.⁶ Source materials are fully searchable, with the zoom feature proving powerful and quick, which is especially useful for medieval source materials. We can embed images, music and film, and we have already uploaded some really unusual materials, such as high quality photos of badges, and even baseball caps! It allows for real visual variety. One great benefit is that we can easily revise, or add to, the e-textbook in the future, so the possibilities are really exciting. Sustainability is something we have discussed from the beginning, and we are confident that the software will allow us to achieve this in the years ahead. For more reflections on the project, and others like it that have been funded by Jisc, please refer to the recently published progress report on the Jisc website.⁷

'We worked hard with BiblioBoard to create the e-textbook that we envisioned'

'we can easily revise, or add to, the e-textbook in the future'

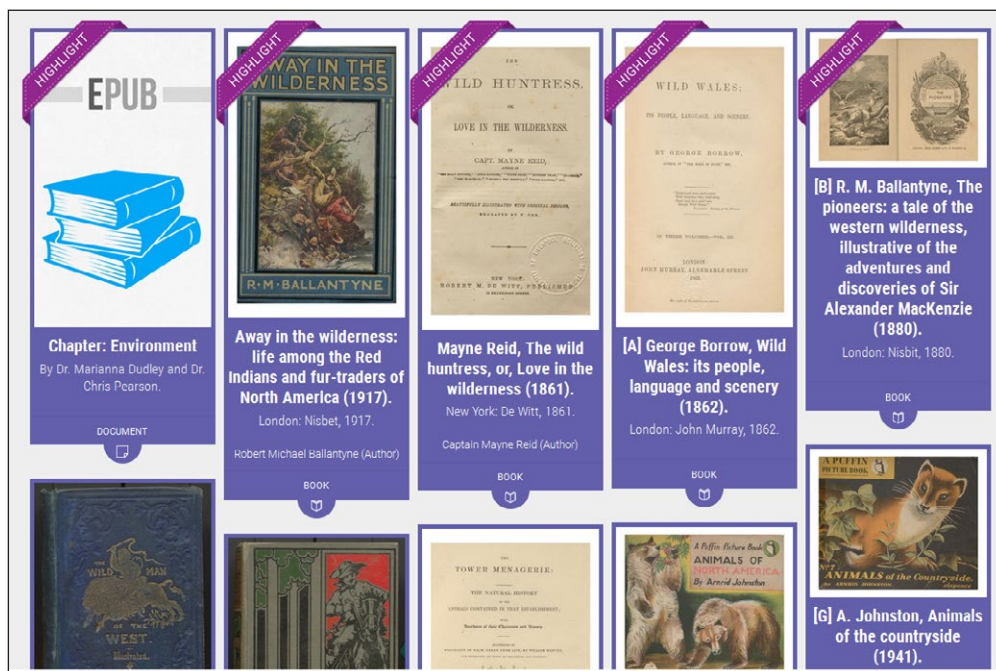


Figure 3. Each chapter contains an essay and a collection of digitized primary source materials

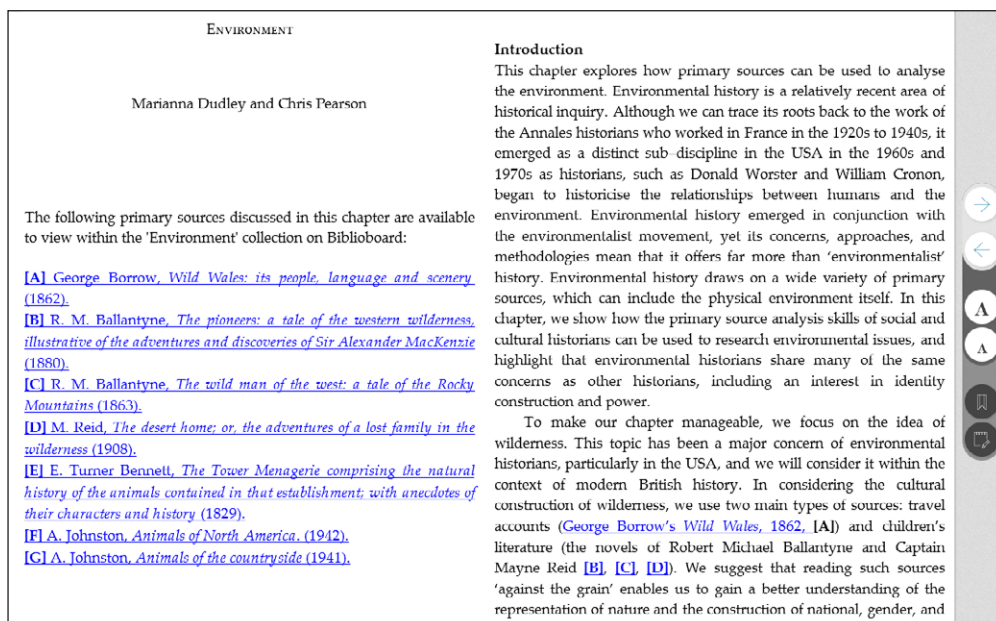


Figure 4. Essays are linked to the primary sources on BiblioBoard

My experience of the project

From an academic's perspective, the collaborative experience has been brilliant. It has been great to work with a team with such diverse expertise, and the project has encouraged creative thinking around a whole host of issues. Working in this way is new for most of us on the project team, and we are quite open about this. We communicate regularly, and seem to solve problems quite quickly. Uploading materials onto BiblioBoard requires a surprising amount of planning and thinking time, and getting used to the functions that the software offers also takes time.

'From an academic's perspective, the collaborative experience has been brilliant'

One big challenge is time, and you have to be patient when working on a project like this. We have to wait for authors to complete their work, and then work with them to revise and edit their chapters, while also curating their selected sources online: obviously, this work cannot be rushed if you want top quality contributions. Because of the student-focused nature of this publication, I think it is safe to say that all authors have found it challenging adapting to a different writing style.

For someone who had not worked on a digital project before, it opened up a whole range of opportunities relating to my work as a teacher and researcher. For instance, I have attended digital humanities conferences as a result, and become involved in a new digital university theme at Liverpool. I would recommend getting involved in collaborative digital projects to any academic who is willing to be open-minded, flexible and committed to a project with a central set of aims that you can be passionate about.

Developing expertise, learning lessons

One of the biggest things I have learned during the project is that problems that might seem minor and simple to solve are often more complicated than they first appear in digital projects such as this. It is also hard to foresee the breadth of issues that can crop up during a large digital project. For instance, when working with BiblioBoard to create chapters in EPUB format – a file format that is designed to allow users to zoom in and out with ease – we had to spend quite a bit of time thinking about how to present page numbers. Because our technical team liaised with BiblioBoard across a range of issues at the same time, resolving single issues was rarely instantaneous. At any one time the project team was working across many different areas, so keeping in frequent contact via e-mail and team meetings proved essential. With a project like this, the core team needs to know the ongoing status of the project, often in quite a lot of detail. We are almost three years into the project and it is clear that we have all developed new expertise, and we are already thinking about possible future projects along the lines of *Using Primary Sources*. As always, this type of teaching-related project needs to be recognized as an important aspect of what academics can do, away from the pressures of research.

'It is ...hard to foresee the breadth of issues that can crop up during a large digital project'

'this type of teaching-related project needs to be recognized as an important aspect of what academics can do'

As the textbook grew, we became better at foreseeing issues, rather than reacting to issues as they arose. The nature of a project such as this means that planning is very important. It is worth planning as much as you possibly can, even if you are unfamiliar with the software that you are using. The day-to-day practicalities of keeping the project ticking over has meant that additional resources that we had planned, such as lesson plans and a 'how to' guide, had to take a back seat, especially when teaching and working on other projects alongside this.

Reflections on the next phase of the project

With all the practical and editorial challenges involved in the project taking up so much of our attention, it has sometimes been difficult to ensure a constant focus on the central

57 pedagogical aims of the book. This is a textbook that is designed to help students develop their research and writing skills, and in the next year we will be evaluating how effective this is as a teaching resource. We are also currently writing lesson plans that can be tailored to suit students and tutors alike. BiblioBoard will provide detailed metrics so we can understand how students are interacting with it, while Jisc can also help with the evaluation of the resource. We will be conducting student focus groups, requesting feedback from users, and conducting a peer-review process.

In an ideal world, should pedagogy come before technology? As the project progressed, it became clear that the characteristics of the software were shaping the project to some degree.

Others have made similar points elsewhere, with Vogel arguing that 'e-learning practice has frequently been seen as being technologically rather than pedagogically driven'.⁸ To what extent does this matter when it comes to digital projects?

If 'there is almost no survey data on the impact of technology on pedagogy',⁹ why should we place trust in new types of e-textbook? After all, when students are starting research for an essay I also want my students to browse the shelves in the library, or have the opportunity to spend a couple of hours looking through an obscure box of uncatalogued ephemera in an archive if it is relevant to their interests. This interaction with our past should go hand in hand with the opportunities and accessibility that the digital age offers us. Perhaps projects like *Using Primary Sources* elegantly solve the dilemma of making archives accessible to a broader public, while also encouraging students to become digitally empowered. We hope that next step will be to involve students in the creation of new resources on BiblioBoard. After all, it can be argued that 'encouraging students to take a "hands on" approach to learning shifts them from being passive consumers of knowledge and empowers them to become active, independent researchers and producers'.¹⁰

'interaction with our past should go hand in hand with the opportunities and accessibility that the digital age offers us'

At the very least, innovative new projects like *Using Primary Sources* open up the opportunity to stop and think about how we articulate what we think might be sensible ways for students to interact with electronic resources. It is difficult to work out the necessary balance between encouraging students to use electronic resources and getting their hands dirty in archives, while all the time building their capabilities as young researchers. We need to be explicit about the benefits of blended learning and digital literacy in the development of student research techniques.¹¹ We hope that our phase of evaluation will start to answer some of these questions, especially as we start to use the textbook in our teaching.

'We need to be explicit about the benefits of blended learning and digital literacy'

Conclusion

In the coming years, we hope that *Using Primary Sources* will enhance our students' learning experience by offering practical, relevant and accessible advice for students in a way that supports research-led teaching and learning. As a showcase for some of the marvellous archival material held at Liverpool, we also hope that the resource will be used far and wide.

Exploring the 'institution as e-textbook creator' has been a long and resource-intensive process, but one that has been hugely rewarding from a professional point of view. Although significant commitment is needed to undertake and sustain these collaborative projects, they encourage innovation and creativity, develop individual and institutional expertise, and foster ideas for future projects.

I often think about how this project originally came about – essentially, by chance. It is safe to say that universities could do more to encourage and fund major teaching projects that are strong enough to attract external funding. Resourcing needs to be generous, with dedicated teams with varied expertise put in place to manage, administer and complete ambitious digital projects, and think of innovative ways to create new digital possibilities for students.

'Resourcing needs to be generous, with dedicated teams with varied expertise put in place'

Abbreviations and Acronyms

A list of the abbreviations and acronyms used in this and other *Insights* articles can be accessed here – click on the URL below and then select the 'Abbreviations and Acronyms' link at the top of the page it directs you to: <http://www.uksg.org/publications#aa>

Competing interests

The authors have declared no competing interests.

References

1. To access *Using Primary Sources*, please follow this link: <http://liverpooluniversitypress.co.uk/pages/using-primary-sources> (accessed 5 January 2017).
2. Jisc: <https://www.jisc-collections.ac.uk/News/Institution-as-e-textbook-publisher-call-for-participation/> (accessed 20 December 2016).
3. For more information, see: <https://www.biblioboard.com/index.html> (accessed 1 February 2017).
4. Barker, A, The Institution as E-textbook Publisher, *Insights*, 2015, 28(3), 51–55. (accessed 20 December 2016). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1629/uksg.265>
5. We used the EPUB e-book file format for all chapters. This allows chapters to be read on handheld devices and other e-readers.
6. VIMEO: <https://vimeo.com/178340206> (accessed 15 December 2016).
7. Jisc: <https://www.jisc-collections.ac.uk/Institution-as-E-textbook-Publisher/News--progress/> (accessed 5 January 2017).
8. Vogel, M, *Engaging academics in professional development for technology enhanced learning, a synthesis report for the UK*, 2010, London, HEA, p.3: <https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resource/engaging-academics-professional-development-technology-enhanced-learning> (accessed 15 December 2016).
9. Attwell, A and Hughes, J, *Pedagogic approaches to using technology for learning: literature review*, September 2010, London, LLUK, p.26: <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20110414152025/>, <http://www.lluk.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/Pedagogical-approaches-for-using-technology-literature-review-january-11-FINAL.pdf> (accessed 12 February 2017).
10. Alker, Z, The Digital Classroom: New Social Media and Teaching Victorian Crime, *Law, Crime and History*, 2015, 5(1) 77–92: <http://lawcrimehistory.org/journal/vol.5%20issue1%202015/Alker%20Blogging%20as%20assessment.pdf> (accessed 15 December 2016).
11. For useful resources on digital literacy and blended learning, see the HEA website: <https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/enhancement/starter-tools/blended-learning> (accessed 15 December 2016).

Article copyright: © 2017 Jonathan Hogg. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution Licence](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted use and distribution provided the original author and source are credited.



Dr Jonathan Hogg
Senior Lecturer and General Editor, Primary Sources
University of Liverpool, GB
E-mail: jgh@liv.ac.uk

ORCID ID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6910-5308>

To cite this article:

Hogg, J, Creating a new type of e-textbook: *Using Primary Sources*, *Insights*, 2017, 30(1), 53-58; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1629/uksg.344>

Published by UKSG in association with Ubiquity Press on 10 March 2017