

CASE STUDY

DR. NICHOLS DISCUSSES THE BENEFITS THAT DIGITAL ARCHIVES OFFER TO RESEARCH AND TEACHING WITH PRIMARY SOURCES

Dr. Catherine Nichols

Department of Anthropology | Center for Textual Studies and Digital Humanities
Loyola University Chicago

Dr. Catherine Nichols, who holds a Ph.D. in Socio-Cultural Anthropology, is an Advanced Lecturer in Cultural Anthropology and Museum Studies within the Department of Anthropology at Loyola University Chicago.

Her work focuses on the study of anthropological specimen exchange between museums in the late nineteenth century, particularly by the Smithsonian Institution. She teaches on a wide range of subjects, including the process of researching museum collections, and has a particular interest in the digitalization of archives.

REMOTE, SEAMLESS GLOBAL ACCESS

For Dr. Nichols and her students, a key benefit of digital archives is its ease of access.

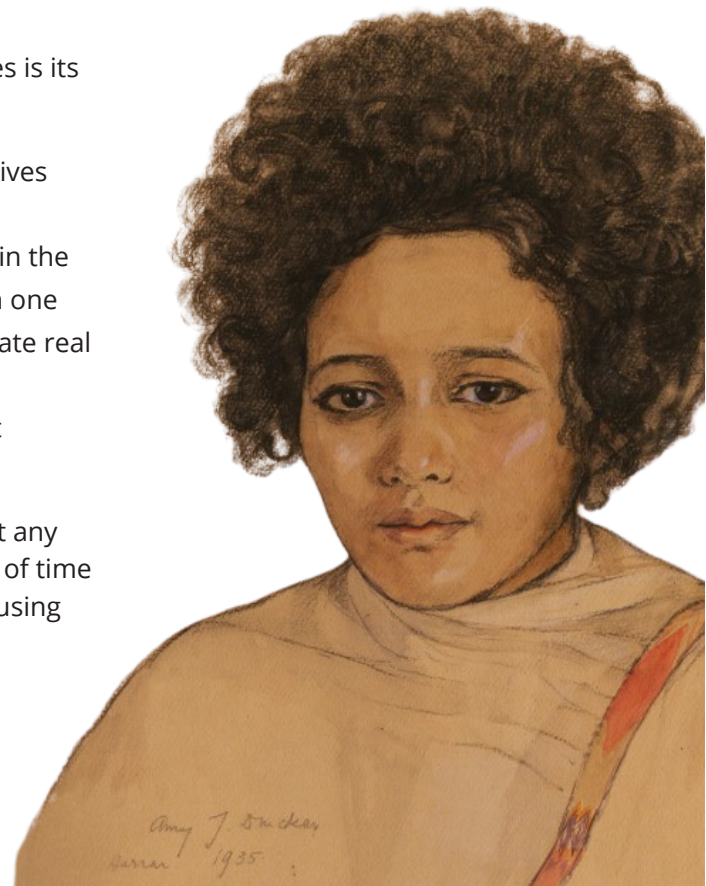
“For my own research, I need to prioritize visits to physical archives that I know will be of interest,” says Dr. Nichols.

“I tend to visit large repositories that I’m fairly certain will contain the archives I’m looking for. Organizing visits to multiple archives in one trip – particularly if I’m traveling to a different country – can create real logistical problems and can be expensive. Also, time slots are restricted so it’s not always possible to extend a visit or request records held offsite without advance notice.”

The ability to access the records held in Wiley Digital Archives at any time, from anywhere in the world, offers huge savings in terms of time and cost and represents a radical shift in methods of research using source materials.

Amy J. Drucker, Drucker portraits, 1930s.

Source: The Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland



Discoverability: an unexpected consequence of cross search



“Access to digitized materials can address some of the issues faced by graduate students and their universities, like time to degree completion. These issues can be limited by lack of funding, so easy access to online resources can make a meaningful difference. Support from librarians is key to this.”

From a research perspective, physical and logistical entry barriers can create “blind spots”, but by using digital archives, researchers and students are able to search across multiple archives and collections, and discover previously unknown materials and connections.

“This creates a fundamental shift in the way I carry out my research,” says Dr. Nichols. “It also impacts how I conceptualize it.

“When I first started utilizing Wiley Digital Archives I was using search terms that pointed me in directions that were likely to be fruitful. The results highlighted the occurrence of these terms in multiple collections, many of which I would not have otherwise looked into. This helps to show the terms in different contexts and therefore extend my research into new areas.

“On a personal level, having access to new materials has reinvigorated my interest in related areas, in a low-cost way. I’ve recently written an article that I would not have been able to publish without access to online archives.”

LOWERING BARRIERS TO ENTRY

Digital archives enable access across libraries and institutions to a much wider population than physical archives.

“It’s an important step for the democratization of archives,” says Dr. Nichols. “Students can now view documents and records digitally, that were previously difficult to access. This aides in efficient and timely data collection, and addresses structural barriers to increase research equity.

“Historically, graduate students might wait years for funding before their research could start. Digital archives allow them to carry out pilot research at a low cost to demonstrate that their project will be successful.

“Access to digitized materials can address some of the issues faced by graduate students and their universities, like time to degree completion. These issues can be limited by lack of funding, so easy access to online resources can make a meaningful difference. Support from librarians is key to this.”

Access to digital archives is also invaluable for grant writing for postgraduate students and academics, says Dr. Nichols. “We can prove to potential funders that the data we need for our research is available, as we are now able to access and view the primary sources upfront.”



Image from the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland

Powering the virtual classroom



“Having access to new materials has reinvigorated my interest in related areas, in a low-cost way. I’ve recently written an article that I would not have been able to publish without access to online archives.”

In the Spring of 2020, Dr. Nichols taught a class that relied on digitized resources. The course focused on a collection of artifacts crafted by missionaries, and digitized primary sources played an important role.

“It can be a challenge to show students how to use primary sources for their own studies. When the pandemic began, it didn’t interrupt my plans for this course too much as everything was available digitally.”

Having access to a range of archives can aid teaching in other ways.

“I’ve taught courses where students built their own exhibits in Omeka by downloading digitized data from numerous repositories,” says Dr. Nichols. “This helped the students identify and search the records they needed and gave them experience of engaging with those resources.

“Digitized archives allow students to use the materials as data and create their own arguments. It gives them an opportunity to create knowledge by interpreting the materials, without having to visit the archives in person.

“Visiting an archive can be intimidating for a young student,” says Dr. Nichols. “There are strict rules to follow, and the students need to plan their visits far in advance – which is not always possible.

“Using digital archives for close analysis is great. It helps acclimatize students to what primary sources look like, how they are organized, and what they might contain, meaning they will be better prepared if and when they visit the archives in person at a later date.”



Amy J. Drucker, *Drucker portraits*, 1930s.
Source: *The Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*

Uncovering hidden connections



“With the search terms I use, the collocations tool gives me a better sense of what is available in the archives. I’m able to click on a word and quickly be led to other information, to access a larger, macro view, and there can be real value in that.”

The collocations feature on the Wiley Digital Archives platform is a powerful resource for researchers.

“The collocations tool is most interesting to me. With the search terms I use, collocations give me a better sense of what is available in the archives. I’m able to click on a word and quickly be led to other information, to access a larger, macro view, and there can be real value in that.

“Macro level data assists in raising new research questions that I haven’t been asking. I’m really interested in time and why exchanges in anthropological material decline at particular points in history. It’s hard to answer, but the materials held in digital archives can give me a sense of why it might be happening.”

Image from the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland



WILEY DIGITAL ARCHIVES

Wiley Digital Archives is the only archival program dedicated to the History of Science and its connections to society and culture. We restore, digitize and catalog millions of rare, primary source materials from some of the world’s most influential scientific societies and universities. Our platform is purposely designed to power research, support teaching, and foster learning.

To find out more, sign up for a free trial at wileydigitalarchives.com

For acquisition inquiries please contact libraryinfo@wiley.com