First a word on why this panel is called “Report from the front lines”. This area, of teaching with primary sources, is still in the early stages of development, and archivists often have little to no formal education training. So by being on the “front lines” I don’t mean to convey expertise, but rather, the experimental nature of this work. I’m really happy to have Patrick Williams and Morgan Gwenwald here to share their experiences, and I also hope the audience will contribute their knowledge and comments during the Q/A. My hope is for the session to provide a mix of both practical lessons and theoretical discussion.
I got hired at SUNY Maritime College in February 2016, and was excited to join a library that had created an archivist position for the first time, and was providing a more visible role for the archives. Only a few weeks after I started my boss informed me that she had signed us up to participate in a professional development day for 60 K-12 teachers from the Bronx, and the library’s role would be to provide a session on working with primary documents.
I'm going to go back to those particulars, but first I wanted to provide a little bit of context to set the stage. I'd highly recommend picking up a copy of Teaching with Primary Sources, a new book that was released by SAA as part of their Trends in Archival Practice series. So far I have only gotten through the first section, on “Contextualizing Archival Literacy,” and I'm looking forward to reading the next two sections, which consist of a guide and case studies.
In the chapter on “Contextualizing Archival Literacy” by Elizabeth Yakel and Doris Malkmus, they refer to “a constellation of interlocking literacies... that come into play in teaching with primary sources.” Specifically, there’s “Domain Knowledge” (you might think of it as subject knowledge), which is necessary for understanding and interpreting primary sources; “Primary Source Literacy,” which is the ability to interrogate and analyze evidence - documents, images, and objects - and make sense of them; and “Archival literacy,” which consists of knowledge of archival theory, practice and institutions, and how to use archives for research. I found these concepts to be both useful and clarifying.

Ideally these literacies would be learned over time, building on one another, though in reality we are dealing with many limitations and time constraints. And with the proliferation of digital collections online, many lesson plans, particularly in K-12 settings, will involve working with particular items without knowledge of the larger context of the collections they came from, how they were made accessible, or exposure to an archivist.
Another take-away from Yakel and Malkmus’s piece is that this is absolutely the time for archivists to figure out our role in teaching with primary sources. Trends in the fields of education, history, libraries, and archives are converging to elevate archival content. Educators are emphasizing using primary sources to develop critical thinking skills and to facilitate active learning in classrooms; scholars to illustrate conflicting points of view and the constructed nature of history; librarians are expanding their roles as information literacy instructors; and archivists are leaving behind the notion that we are passive gatekeepers of dusty old things and instead becoming activists and advocates for our collections and their use. But in order to be effective advocates we need to understand what these other folks are looking for, insert ourselves into the discussion, and find opportunities for collaboration.
So now let’s get back to my dilemma of having a large group of K-12 teachers coming to the archive, and no prior archives instruction experience. Initially I thought I’d show off some of our “greatest hits,” like a letter from George Washington to the Marine Society of New York. However I quickly discarded this idea after reading some critiques of this approach online: this method is not participatory and doesn’t engender critical thinking. Then I went in the opposite direction, and thought I’d take out whole boxes of materials, potentially even unprocessed materials, and try to replicate that special experience of a researcher or archivist discovering what’s inside.
Well, then I found TeachArchives.org and rethought my plans once again. TeachArchives.org is the result of a three-year grant at the Brooklyn Historical Society which partnered with 18 faculty at 3 colleges to bring over 1,100 students to the archives to analyze original documents. The conclusions from that project are disseminated through their website, which includes articles on pedagogy and sample exercises.

Julie Golia and Robin M. Katz, who developed the TeachArchives philosophy, note that for students with little or no prior exposure to archives, navigating whole boxes or even folders can be confusing and overwhelming. Instead, they say that activities for beginning students should focus on item-level document analysis. The exercises on the site demonstrate how fewer documents make for richer student learning experiences. In only one exercise do students even encounter an entire folder, and that is after previous visits based on one document. I definitely wanted to model a lesson that the teachers might be able to replicate with their students successfully, so I decided to heed their advice by designing a document analysis exercise for the class.
In order to narrow things down, I decided to select items from the records of Sailors’ Snug Harbor, a retirement home for “decrepit, worn-out, and aged sailors.” The home was founded in 1801 via the will of Robert Richard Randall, a wealthy merchant who owned 23 acres in what is now Greenwich Village. The facility was constructed in Staten Island in 1833 and thrived there for over 140 years, providing a home to a diverse group of sailors from around the world.

Before getting started with the exercise I provided an introduction to the Luce Library Archives and Special Collections, outlined objectives of the workshop, and provided a brief historical overview of Sailors’ Snug Harbor. I then asked participants to pair up in teams of two. Each team received a folder containing one or two original documents, a citation providing context for the item(s), and a Library of Congress handout with discussion questions. As I walked around the class, I was delighted to overhear (and get drawn into) competing interpretations of difficult hand-writing, googling of unknown phrases and terms, and other conversations about the materials. This was followed by report backs, with one member of each team summarizing their item(s) for the larger group. During these reports, participants started to compare and contrast the experiences of the residents and to raise questions about the biases embedded within the documents. I was super nervous to teach teachers, but I am happy to say this went relatively smoothly!
Here is a shot of the History 102 students from this January. For this class I used the collection of Arthur M. Tode, an alumni of the school who had a prestigious career. After graduating from the New York Nautical School (as SUNY Maritime College was then called) in 1912, he went on to serve as Chief Engineer of the Newport, the school’s training ship; served in the Naval Reserve during World War I; and brought the Propeller Club, a maritime civic organization, to national prominence. The Engineering Building on campus is named after Tode, though most students know little about him. Each team of two students got a folder with a document that illustrated a different facet of Tode’s life. The folder also contained a document analysis worksheet which I adapted from a more generic template from the National Archives & Records Administration (NARA). A representative from each team reported their findings to the group, and together we began to construct a rough biographical outline of Tode’s life on the whiteboard.

I should note that in the fall History 101 class, not using a worksheet didn’t go well; students didn’t naturally jump into discussion and there wasn’t a coherent sense of what they were supposed to do with the item they were examining. It might depend on the culture of the students, but at Maritime, having a structured worksheet worked a lot better than a list of suggested discussion questions.
Incorporating a little archival literacy

Powerpoint I developed briefly addresses:

- What are archives?
- Why are they significant?
- How are the relevant to people now?
- How do you find them?
- How are they organized by archivists?
- What do we have at Maritime College?
- How do you use archives in research?

But I’m not sure how much of this can be absorbed in a one-shot deal.

They may only take away that archives exist and that I’m there to help, which is fine.
On November 21 1986 National Security Council staff member Oliver North and his secretary, Fawn Hall, begin shredding documents that would have exposed their participation in a range of illegal activities regarding the sale of arms to Iran and the diversion of the proceeds to a rebel Nicaraguan group. On November 25, North was fired but Hall continued to sneak documents to him by stuffing them in her skirt and boots. The Iran-Contra scandal, as it came to be known, became an embarrassment and a sticky legal problem for the Reagan administration.

http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/oliver-north-starts-feeding-documents-into-the-shredding-machine

In order to make the powerpoint lively, I incorporate examples from history...
Archives in the News

New Jersey university to host Bruce Springsteen's archives

Associated Press | JANUARY 11, 2017 — 2:05PM

WEST LONG BRANCH, N.J. — A university in Bruce Springsteen's native New Jersey will become home to the rocker's personal collection of written works, artifacts, photographs and other memorabilia from his decades-long career.

The Bruce Springsteen Archives and Center for American Music at Monmouth University will curate the works. Springsteen and the university announced during a Tuesday event where he was interviewed about his career.

The university, in West Long Branch, has been the home of the Bruce Springsteen Special Collection since 2011. The new archive will promote and preserve the legacy of Springsteen as well as other music icons, including Frank Sinatra and Woody Guthrie.

...as well as contemporary examples of archives in the news.
Now I am going to talk about some of the challenges of teaching with primary sources. The first: as an archivist I am an expert on organizing the collections, not their content. I don’t regularly engage in item-level description, since we describe in aggregate, especially with more modern MPLP approaches, and don’t have time to closely examine content while processing. So creating a lesson plan with specific items requires a lot of extra time and research or the willingness of faculty or other collaborators to do this work.
Challenge:
Faculty Buy-In (and time)

Uniting domain knowledge with primary source and archival literacy is best achieved through collaboration.

For the History 101 and 102 classes, I would have felt better if the archives visits were planned in conjunction with a specific unit of the class, with items selected by the faculty member, but that didn’t end up happening.

Instead, I counted in the students familiarity with the cultural norms of the school and the maritime industry for their domain knowledge. I should note that the majority of our students train to be licensed merchant mariners, and are part of a regiment of cadets; hence the uniforms! One of the most fun items to examine from the Tode collection was his record in the conduct book, listing his infractions and demerits. Students today who are part of the regiment still deal with strict disciplinary codes and were able to contrast and compare. Moving forward I’m hoping I can build on the relationships I have formed to create a more structured archives program.
Challenge: Relating to Educators on their terms

Educators work best with thematically organized materials, as opposed to collections organized by provenance.

Not saying we should throw out traditional archival principles, but we should consider how to meet these needs.
Thanks!
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International

Note in discussion if possible:
SAA-ACRL/RBMS Joint Task Force on the Development of Guidelines for
Primary Source Literacy (Affiliated Group) is releasing guidelines soon.