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A dialog on teaching an undergraduate seminar in special collections

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to provide a model for the collaborative teaching of undergraduates in special collections and demonstrates how providing students with the opportunities to work rare books can result in meaningful experiences for both students and faculty.

Design/methodology/approach – Collaborative teaching across disciplines, in this case an English faculty member and a librarian can be challenging and rewarding. This paper is written in dialogue form and highlights both perspectives.

Findings – For academics and librarians interested in incorporating book history and special collections in undergraduate coursework, this paper underscores the benefits and pitfalls in planning such courses.

Practical implications – This is an honest discussion on methods to engage undergraduates with rare books and exhibit preparations.

Originality/value – As many library professionals seek to make their rare book collections more accessible through class instruction, this paper provides one pedagogical model with reflections on what we would do next time.

Keywords Undergraduates, Teaching, Books, Special libraries

Paper type Case study

Introduction

In 2002, Schmiesing and Hollis bemoaned the lack of research on teaching in special collections. A wave of recent articles has explored the benefits of engaging undergraduates with special collections (rare books and ephemera) and the utility of varied teaching methodologies including lectures, class discussions, and active learning. The following essay explores the challenges and benefits resulting from an undergraduate book history seminar (English 492) that met weekly in special collections and featured a collaborative class exhibit.

In 2007, Todd Butler, an Assistant Professor in English specializing in early modern literature, and I, Trevor Bond, Interim Head, Manuscripts, Archives, and Special Collections, decided to teach the course together after years of collaborating on assignments and class visits to special collections. After reflecting on the experience, we felt that the following essay would be a way for us to explore issues relating to collaborative teaching, pedagogy with rare books, and the place of book history in undergraduate education. What did our students gain from the experience and what would we do differently next time?

Working together as faculty colleagues

Butler: Developing a joint course is always challenging, and it's usually more work than anyone ever expects. There are always institutional barriers to such cooperation,



such as determining who gets the “credit” (and how much) for teaching an individual course. Other faculty in my department had already team-taught courses, so I didn’t have to blaze any new ground. Your particular status as a “librarian” and your long-time connections to our department probably helped as well.

Bond: Though librarians have faculty status at WSU, we are always the “other” faculty, and our appointments do not mirror those of the teaching faculty with predictable course loads and service requirements. For me the seminar was a luxury, to have ample time to spend with eight students. However, the time spent with the course was due to the good graces of my colleagues who covered for me on Monday afternoons.

Butler: Besides the logistics and administrative details, I also remember being struck by how much our team-teaching forced me to re-examine my own pedagogy. The history of printing and book culture has a specific (and growing) place in literary studies, but that didn’t mean my approach would be the same as yours. Also, I knew how *I* liked running a seminar, but I didn’t know how you liked teaching or what you wanted students to get out of the class.

Bond: One of the outcomes that I most appreciated about the seminar was the chance to see the same students all semester. As a librarian, I typically get students started on their research projects; sometimes share in their initial enthusiasm, but rarely have the opportunity to see their finished projects and consider whether the library provides them with the best possible support for their work. So my primary desire for the class was to engage our students with special collections, which meant combining individual work with collaborative assignments. I wanted them to have a hands-on experience unlike any of their other courses, and to teach them that the materials that we hold aren’t museum pieces. Meredith Torre (2008) demonstrates that special collections department often put out “exclusive vibes” that can be extremely intimidating to students. Our seminar, I think, broke down those barriers and demonstrated that our rare book collections, handled with care, are intended to be used.

Butler: I also wanted something different, something that would help our students reconsider the very nature of the literature they’d been studying for the past several years. That’s why I was particularly excited when the course was approved in my department not only for traditional English majors but also for those students pursuing a new major called digital technology and culture (DTC). DTC students emphasize not print culture but new media such as computer animation, web interfaces, and the like. Yet despite this apparent difference, the faculty in this track recognized quickly how studying the materiality of texts engaged many of the same questions their own research did. But for both our traditional and DTC students, the idea of looking at books as material items was still something unusual.

Classroom praxis

Bond: Early in the semester class discussions were difficult to maintain. Not only did we have the class carefully examine early printed books (something completely new to most of the group), we also assigned challenging essays from Finkelstein and McCleery’s *The Book History Reader*. In some ways *The Book History Reader* is a collection of manifestos from about ten different critical approaches.

Butler: And how do you engage a manifesto when you’re 19, 20, or 21 and you’ve never even considered the issues these approaches engage? How do you get started when students don’t have a firm entry point into these conversations? Instead of immediately getting to what I thought were core issues, I found myself initially having

to do much more basic explanation than I had expected in a senior seminar. Looking back on it, I'm not sure assigning reading, at least initially, was in keeping with my desire to approach the course differently – I was still valuing the text and the academic essay. I think I would have spent more time with the materials themselves, and then used readings to help extend conclusions we'd already begun to reach.

Bond: Assigning a student each week to start the conversation by posing a few questions really helped energize our discussions, since it made the students rather than just ourselves responsible for the material. Pulling back to consider some of the larger issues addressed in the essays also helped. For example, before diving into Ong, we would ask broad questions that our students could answer such as, what elements of oral culture do the students see in their own lives? To spice-up our three hours together each week and model the interdisciplinary nature of book history, we invited weekly presenters from English, History, and special collections.

Butler: For me at least these presentations represented both the best and the most challenging elements of teaching this course. Students were exposed to fascinating research done by faculty passionate about their work. Yet gaining access to these topics was itself initially difficult – most of our students just simply hadn't done the sort of concentrated interdisciplinary work that characterizes the best research in print culture. I realized again and again that we were faced with not only teaching "English," but also history, economics, sociology, and perhaps even anthropology, all in a three-hour time block.

Designing our course exhibit

Bond: The result of these varied presentations was that for our major class project – mounting an exhibit in special collections – the students had a range of topics to choose from.

Butler: While the students were expected to develop their own exhibit cases of material, each individual segment had to cohere with the others in the room. That meant developing some sort of common theme, and while we could have simply announced a topic, Trevor and I were loath to intervene in that process too much. Ultimately the students were going to have to create the exhibit, and thus it needed to be something with which they could engage.

Bond: But in the weeks leading up to the exhibit opening with so much unfocused energy and indecision regarding an exhibit theme, it was unclear if the exhibit would be a triumph or disaster.

Butler: You're right – I think we initially underestimated just how complex even selecting a theme would be. In many ways we were asking them to synthesize everything they'd learned so far. A fine goal in the abstract, but a tough thing to do in practice under the brunt of a deadline for a project whose very public nature initially made some students quite nervous.

Bond: We asked our students to submit exhibit ideas, but none of these generated much excitement among the whole group. After further discussion did not lead to resolution, Todd and I took the somewhat dramatic step of leaving the room, shutting the door, and not returning until the class had decided on our exhibit theme. I had never done something like this. It felt exhilarating to step away and compel our class to agree on a good idea or risk being shut-in. At the exhibit opening, one of the students described this episode as a pivotal moment in the class.

Butler: Leaving the class alone was the single most important decision we made that semester, and like many pedagogical breakthroughs it stemmed from a combination of

desperation and exasperation, to which was added a bit of trust. We were desperate because time was quickly passing and the exhibit had to occur. We were exasperated because the entire premise of a seminar (at least in my thinking) was that students should become equal partners in learning, and up until that point the class tended toward a more traditional, teacher-centered class. At this point, our students had to take ownership of the course and we had to give it up, and literally stepping aside represented a leap of trust and faith that they would do so.

Bond: What we eventually decided upon was to explore the value of books as cultural objects beyond simply their monetary worth. This allowed our students to work in pairs or individually on their cases. We had students work with incunabula, ephemera, annotated books, suppressed lithographs, books printed in vernacular languages, early illustrated editions of Milton. Todd and I joined in the fun by co-curating two exhibit cases, one exploring crime and justice and a second examining book collecting.

Butler: Watching these exhibit elements develop was exciting, though it was also inevitably hard work. I was reminded again and again of just how crucial our team-teaching was, for while I could offer suggestions on conceptual topics it was your ability to identify relevant material – and show the students how it could connect with their own ideas – that really made these exhibition cases successful. I could give them suggestions for keywords and help them plow through the catalog, but your intimate familiarity with the collection was impossible for me to match.

Bond: But you took on the task of helping students edit their captions and clean-up egregious errors while keeping the “flavor” of their style. My favorite quote from the exhibit (and one that demonstrates how our students found their own way to engage with the collections) came from a display case of ephemera that included an elaborate nineteenth century steam ship menu, “however, also note the Budweiser beer.”

Butler: I suppose one man’s ephemera is another’s cultural signifier, isn’t it? But none of our work would have looked as strong without the graphic designer for special collections, Jeff Kuure, whose task it was to provide the visuals that made the cases into a seamless whole. Here again we left the choice to the students, but by this point they were much more capable of giving direction – they first described the general “look” they wanted and then selected from sample templates the designer had created, all largely without input or prodding from us.

Bond: Jeff created such a lovely template that even with a wide range of writing styles, the entire exhibit looked terrific, something that we were all proud of. The following semester, several of our students even brought their friends to see it. Once the exhibit ended, I gave the students their poster captions. But for me, the most rewarding moment of the seminar was hearing our students speak during the afternoon opening of our class exhibit “Redefining value: An exhibit of 500 years of printing.” Hearing them speak in their own words about how they decided upon their themes and the choices they had made about how to illustrate those themes demonstrated most profoundly that they had indeed made connections between the theory we had read and the rare books, ephemera, and lithographs in special collections. (see Figure 1.)

Butler: They didn’t necessarily sound like experts, but what was readily apparent was not only how much they had learned but also how much these students cared about the material they had gathered. One English major, for example, had such a passion for *Paradise Lost* that it spilled over to his partner, a DTC major who explained he could finally see why people could get passionate about a book like *Paradise Lost*,

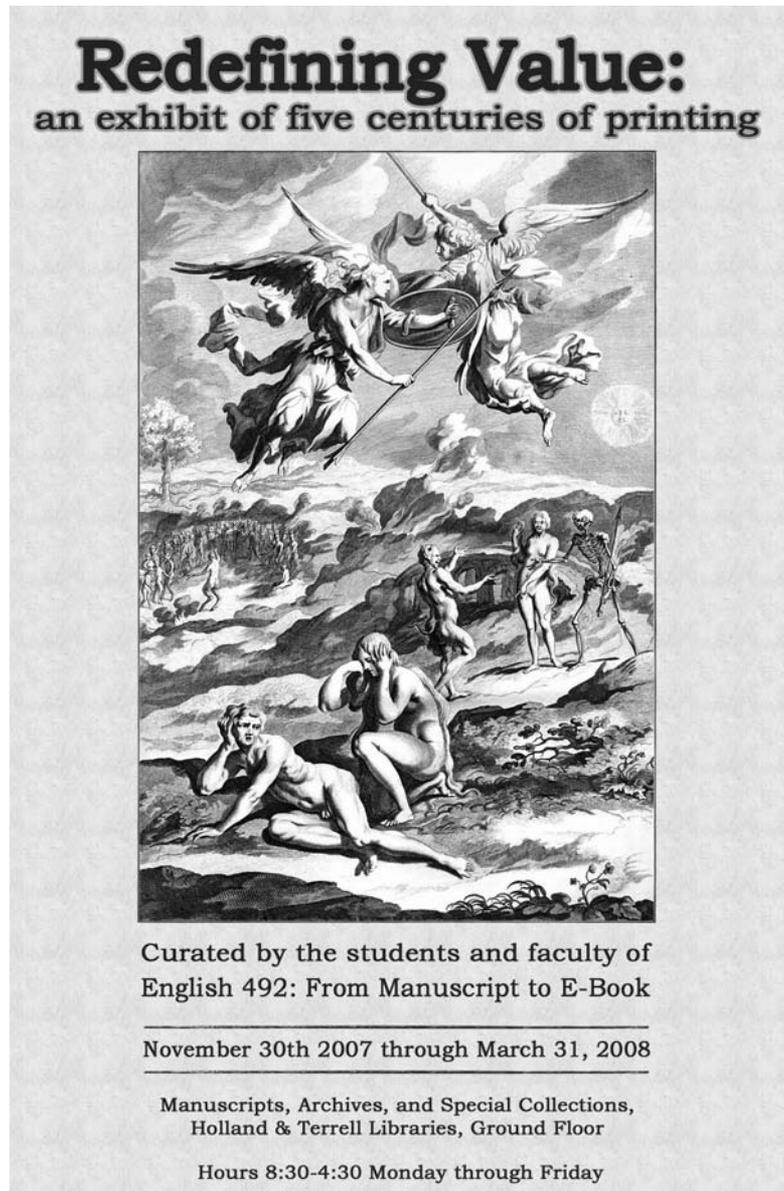


Figure 1.
Exhibit poster designed
by Jeff Kuure

especially when he considered its design, its production, and the inherent visuality of the text.

What we would do next time

Bond: The first thing that I would change would be the day and time from a once a week seminar on monday afternoons to a tuesday/thursday schedule. With holidays during the fall semester, meeting weekly resulted in two missed class sessions and the

thanksgiving holiday (a full week of vacation on campus) made it difficult to proof the captions and mount the exhibit.

Butler: Agreed. As I noted earlier, I also think integrating the exhibit or other hands-on work into the course from the start would have been helpful. We provided our students with a great deal of background information in the form of readings and guest speakers, and I think that was necessary given the myriad elements that make up “book history.” But I’m not sure we provided enough opportunities to reflect, analyze, and synthesize this material.

Bond: Although our students wrote sample captions, exhibit and case proposals, then final captions, and a term paper, in the first few weeks we should also have asked them to complete brief, discrete descriptions of books with a focus on particular physical characteristics, such as bindings, formats, and annotations.

Butler: After teaching this course, I’m convinced that at least in this case, that our studies succeeded most when they were done not in the abstract but in relation to the archive and its materials. The physical elements of books are the key to making the questions and approaches of book history real and understandable to our students. If we kept the emphasis on reading, I might start with some more advance planning that would link each article with a specific physical item that itself would be part of the “reading” for that session.

Bond: I’d be inclined to change the readings we assigned. Though I personally loved *The Book History Reader*, I think that the essays assumed more background than most of our students had. Indeed, one of them remarked that he enjoyed the course *in spite* of the readings. Although Blackwell’s *A Companion to Book History* edited by Simon Eliot and Jonathan Rose, was not published in time for us to order it for the course, we did have our students read Martin Andrews excellent chapter on the “Importance of Ephemera.” I think that the arrangement of scope of the *Companion to Book History* would have been better suited to our needs. With a list price of \$158, I just hope that Blackwell’s will consider issuing the book in paper.

What role should book history play in undergraduate education?

Butler: While we often think of book history as a field for bibliophiles, what struck me most about this course was how this approach could get a variety of students excited about books, reading, and cultural studies. Our DTC students, for example, were used to thinking about “texts” as cultural markers, but many of them seemed initially skeptical about applying their new media studies to “old books.” At our state school there’s often a profound presentist bias in what is considered valuable, and book history offers a way to respond to those concerns *without* watering down the importance of historical knowledge and distinctions.

Bond: I think that an introduction to book history is valuable for undergraduates. Fundamentally our students learned that they could use the methodologies we studied to ask new questions about texts, authorship, censorship, and a host of other areas. Beyond the readings and discussions, the experience of the course – especially preparing the exhibit – was something that was new to them. For most of our students this was their first opportunity to hold a seventeenth-century book and to apply what they had learned to real stuff. One of the students in the seminar went off to library school at the University of Washington and a second will intern in special collections this fall. Beyond those specific examples, I think that working with special collections is a powerful way for undergraduates to engage with the material culture of the past. It provides the means for them to develop their own historical imagination.

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