

# Re-imagining Teaching and Learning through Material Culture

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## *The Backdrop*

The Department of Special Collections, Archives, & Preservation (SCAP) facilitates engagement with rare books and archival primary source materials critical to course curricula. Our primary source instruction focuses both on content and on the materiality of works as artifacts, a synthesis that engenders an “historical empathy,” a “cognitive and affective engagement” connecting students of the present with authors and ideas of the past (Endacott and Brooks 2013, 41). In a process that we have described as one part seduction and two parts immersion, students are drawn into materials selected to promote inquiry-driven study and to ignite scholarly conversations across time (ACRL). The pairing of the classical and the modern, the ancient philosopher and the undergraduate, casts the students themselves as scholars with stories to tell, the most recent voices in lively, centuries-old conversations (Long et al. 2017, 41).

The materiality of our works is central to the hands-on, kinesthetic experience that we believe is critical to fully engaged, active learning. For books and archival collections, it is a materiality embedded in vellum, papers, inks, and bindings: the ingredients in centuries of written and visual expression and interaction. A fifteenth-century French missal illuminated with marginal notations directing the priest in the proper celebration of the Mass reflects both the materials of its creation and its use in daily practice. An original hand-tooled book cover once pierced by a cautious owner to allow for a chain to secure it to a library shelf seen on our *Alfontij regis castell[ae] illustrissimi C[ae]lestiu[m] motu[m] tablule* (Venice, 1483) speaks to the book’s life as a highly valued material object. Letters sent home from scouting expeditions near Verdun by American intelligence officer and CU professor Captain Francis Wolle and from the trenches of Gallipoli by British Captain Leonard Tinné Berthon during World War I offer an intimate physical connection that brings past conflicts to life, fostering the growth of students’ historical empathy.

In this respect, SCAP’s teaching processes rely upon object-based learning, which, though more commonly associated with museum education, has made inroads in instruction in libraries and archives. The text of rare books and manuscripts provides an added dimension to this method of learning. Christina E. Van Kraayenoord and Scott G. Paris have noted the “analogous processes between the reading of texts and the reading of objects” (2002, 216). Reflecting on the applicability of these processes between disciplines, Helen J. Chatterjee, Leonie Hannan, and Linda Thomson have argued that contact with “textual objects ... could offer the benefits of active and experiential learning that have been discussed in relation to museum-based learning” (2015, 8). In their critique of the traditional lack of opportunity for undergraduates to interact with the “authenticity of the archive,” the authors emphasize a “strong argument in favour of increasing the interaction such students have with the primary materials of research at an earlier stage of their development as scholars” (2015, 8). Beyond the clear advantages of furthering students’ research skills and scholarship, object-based learning coupled with hands-on engagement with rare materials and archival collections promotes cognitive processes and memory. The tactile component of object-based learning reinforces the retention of knowledge; more specifically, *haptic* exploration, a sense of touch that includes the exploration of objects through movement, interacts with vision to produce an enhanced learning experience (Sharp, et .al., 2015, 113; Tiballi, 2015, 58-59). Further, the benefits of

object-based learning are not restricted to individuals but are also experienced by groups, through the encouragement of creative, lateral thinking and teamwork (University of Melbourne).

The synthesis of object-based learning focused on a materiality of text and image together with primary-source instruction dependent upon content – a hybrid model, in essence – is critical to our process. We instruct students in the careful handling and paging through of our works, allowing materiality and content to work together to ignite those critical scholarly conversations between the undergraduate or graduate student and centuries of predecessors in the sciences, engineering, literature, and the arts (ACRL). From our experience, such an approach encourages the kind of research-based, inquiry-driven education recommended by the Boyer Commission on Educating Undergraduates in the Research University (1998).

The physical spaces of Special Collections, Archives, & Preservation serve as one setting for our cross-disciplinary laboratory for the study of the materiality of text and image. Through partnerships and collaborations with campus and off-campus faculty, our undergraduate and graduate students contribute to scholarship through traditional research and through creative projects including online exhibits featuring our works, letterpress and relief printing, bookbinding, and the creation of artists' books and illustrated children's books. Spaces and resources dedicated to object-based learning such as those seen at the University of Pennsylvania's Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology and at the University of Melbourne's Special Collections and Archives are essential for "translating educational best practice into lived experience for students" (Chatterjee et al., 2015, 10).

*New Approaches to Teaching and Learning through Special Collections, Archives, & Preservation:*

*Future Challenges and Opportunities*

Engagement in informal learning that offers students a "lived experience" beyond the walls of the library has become increasingly important. We see an opportunity to increase the number of students who experience tactile- or object-based learning through the study of rare and archival material culture. This may well be the time to break down barriers to this experience. Continued interdepartmental and cross-disciplinary collaboration with campus partners such as the CU Art Museum, the CU Museum of Natural History, and the CU Heritage Center, as well as off-campus collaborators including the Book Arts League, fosters a synergy, exchange, and cross-fertilization that benefits both our departments and the students we teach. We also continue to explore pioneering approaches to object-based learning such as those seen at the University College London, where learning takes place not only through the institution's extensive zoological, archaeological, ethnographic, and library collections but also through the development of a course dedicated to the topic: *Object Lessons: Communicating Knowledge through Collections* (University College London). Recent approaches to collections-based learning suggest innovative methods of breaking down walls entirely. Student- and/or public-generated, archives-based projects seen, for example, at Vanderbilt University's Space, Learning, Mobility (SLaM) Lab, capitalize on the interface between archival collections and the cultural heritage of the surrounding community (Hall and Shapiro, 2017). By creating flexible spaces in which students can access collections, we can expand our capability to foster engagement, enhance learning experience, and spark creativity among CU undergraduate and graduate students.

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