

Engaging Undergraduates in Special Collections Through English Composition

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Special collections and archives in college libraries have long been intimidating to undergraduates. They are seen by many as the domain of expert researchers seeking knowledge of arcane subjects, poring over dusty tomes in the furthest reaches of the library. In an atmosphere of increasingly homogeneous general collections, it has been said that special collections holdings will be what sets academic libraries apart from one another. Because of this shift, it is becoming increasingly important for librarians to demystify these collections and actively engage undergraduates in their use. Perhaps one of the most effective strategies to accomplish this feat is collaborate with campus faculty to develop assignments that require students to utilize special collections materials.

However, engaging undergraduates in this context comes with a unique set of challenges. Librarians must first overcome their trepidation of using unfamiliar research materials. Though familiar with traditional sources, many have never used the types of materials normally found in a special collection such as maps, manuscripts, or broadsides. They have never been presented with the long list of rules inherent to the use of special collections materials such as the prohibition of ink pens or the use of cotton gloves to handle fragile materials. Being familiar only with the library's OPAC and a handful of databases as discovery tools, they are also apprehensive of using the diverse and specialized finding aids maintained by special collections departments.

History of the Program

Our effort to develop a program to encourage undergraduates to use special collections materials began in 2001 as a joint project between the East Carolina University Department of English and the Verona Joyner Langford North Carolina Collection. The assignment, given to second semester freshman English composition students, asks them to select an "artifact" from one of the collections that focuses on an aspect of North Carolina history and then to place it in its historical context. The "artifacts" used by students vary widely and reflect the diversity of departmental holdings including rare books, manuscripts, maps, newspapers, periodicals, and broadsides both in print and on microfilm. Once selected, the students then seek secondary sources that will help them to explain the significance of their selection.

Originally, one of the goals of the project was merely to get students into the library itself as many, particularly undergraduates, rarely visit their campus libraries, preferring to find most sources online. The reasons for this are numerous, but from first hand conversations with students, it is believed that the root cause is intimidation concerning the library

itself. This includes worries about navigating the building and not understanding the organizational system for library holdings. The assignment combats these fears by requiring students to interact with library staff and to make them aware of the types of expert assistance that is available to for one essay, but also for their continuing academic careers. It is also hoped that giving students early exposure to special collections will help students to develop solid research skills and engage them through resources that are available somewhere other than online.

In addition, faculty members often state that many undergraduate students have difficulty thinking both critically and analytically. This reality greatly influenced the structure and scope of the assignment. When students were allowed to simply choose a topic related to North Carolina history, they tended to merely gather information and repackage it in their papers rather than engage in any sort of meaningful analysis. Having students focus on a particular "artifact" and then place it in its historical context encourages students to think critically about the focus of their work by considering such factors as when and why it was produced and for what type of intended audience.

Processes

The assignment begins to unfold early in the semester. Librarians from both Special Collections and the North Carolina Collection who coordinate the assignment meet with English instructors to give them an orientation for the assignment and to answer any questions that they may have. This initial meeting is especially important as most of the instructors are graduate teaching assistants and many are themselves unfamiliar with the types of resources that will be made available to their students. Most have a heavy workload, usually leading two sections of approximately 25 students each. This initial session includes an overview of the assignment, the types of materials that would be ideal for students to use, and insight into how their classes' bibliographic instruction sessions will unfold. It is hoped that by getting the instructors familiar with the assignment early in the semester they will be able to better prepare students for their work before they even set foot in the library for their instructional sessions.

The students usually attend separate instructional sessions for both the Special Collections and the North Carolina Collection. This is necessary due to differences in both the holdings of the two collections and differences in the way they operate. Though ECU's Special Collections contains special and rare materials and operates like a traditional special collection, the North Carolina Collection differs in that it is a hybrid collection. This means that in addition to holding materials such as rare books, broadsides, and maps, it also holds a significant amount of circulating materials.

Instructional sessions for the North Carolina Collection are held in one of the library's two smart classrooms which are equipped with digital projectors and computers for each student to use. During the session, students are shown how to use the catalog to

conduct targeted searches for not only their "artifact" but for the types of secondary sources that will help them put it into its historical context. In addition, they are also shown in-house finding aids that are maintained by the department such as the Guide to North Carolina Newspapers on Microfilm and the North Carolina Periodicals Index. They are also shown several examples of "artifacts" that would be suitable for the project and led through an exercise utilizing some of the resources they had been shown. The class is then taken on a short tour of the North Carolina Collection itself.

Instructional sessions for Special Collections have traditionally been held in the department's reading room. During the session, students are taught the basic rules for using materials and how to navigate their specialized finding aids, introduced to the types of holdings, and are shown a number of examples of "artifacts" that would be suitable for their project. This is accomplished through use of a portable digital projector and a laptop computer. This setup is advantageous as it allows the students to actually experience the location (one of the most beautiful yet remote in the library) and gain a level of comfort before they begin work in the collection itself. It also allows for the secure environment necessary to show the students examples of materials suitable for their assignment.

Instructors often opt to hold a second work session in either Special Collections or the North Carolina Collection itself. These sessions give the students additional supervised work time that will help them to identify the "artifact" that they will be using and begin searching for secondary sources to establish the artifact's context. Both departments schedule extra staff at their service desks to accommodate all of the students, normally numbering about 25. These sessions, though sometimes hectic, are often the most fulfilling for library staff as they assist these novice researchers in their work. Students also have the option to request one-on-one research consultations with a librarian for further assistance.

Benefits of the assignment

First and foremost, the assignment benefits the students. This is most eloquently explained by instructor Adrienne Rea, who led her class in the assignment during the spring 2007 semester:

"The students who participate in using artifacts from Special Collections gain exposure to the use of primary resources as a part of the research process early on in their college careers. They are able to utilize these primary sources for subjects that they may have previously thought were "modern" or "generationally unique". They are also given the opportunity to understand at a more personal level some of the historical events they had studied before in high school classes. For some, it opens up an interest in some aspect of history that was previously nonexistent. For a few, it draws them into considering the options of

history, archaeology, or preservation as career choices after their experiences with these rare and unique pieces of history.”

In fact, several award-winning papers have been produced by students completing the assignment, including winners of the W. Keats Sparrow Award, which recognizes excellence in research and writing by students in the university’s English 1200 composition classes. The most recent winner, awarded in spring of 2007, wrote a paper that used a hand stitched bonnet as a springboard for a discussion on rural farm life in North Carolina.

Other benefits have included a steep rise for both departments for each year that the assignment has been in place in terms of circulation statistics and the number of reference questions answered. The number of bibliographic sessions held and students reached by the assignment has risen as well. During the 2006/2007 academic year the departments hosted a combined 58 sections of English classes comprising over 1300 students. As the sizes of incoming freshman classes continue to increase, there is no reason to think that these numbers will decline in the foreseeable future.

Problems encountered

Though there have been relatively few problems with the assignment, several of them do warrant a mention. Perhaps the biggest problem is the nature of the collections utilized for the assignment itself. Many of the resources used by students are from rare collections and are fragile by nature. We have used two strategies to address this issue including allowing students to take digital photographs of these materials and encouraging the use of materials featured in the Eastern North Carolina Digital Library (<http://digital.lib.ecu.edu/historyfiction/>) which features over 500 digitized works including books, maps, and museum artifacts. The Digital Library is especially attractive to many students as they like the ability to access special materials at any time and in any place.

There are also problems with stress in the collections. This is especially difficult in the North Carolina Collection, where some materials circulate. As the semester unfolds and more of the students begin their research, some find that their desired sources have already been checked out. We have attempted to alleviate this problem by acquiring second and even third copies of some of the most-requested materials.

The other issue that we have encountered is a lack of space for bibliographic instruction. The Joyner library has only two instructional classrooms which are shared among all of the library’s departments. This makes scheduling sessions exceedingly difficult. Instructors who do not contact library staff early in the semester often find themselves unable to schedule sessions on a preferred date, proving frustrating to both instructors and library staff. As the likelihood of acquiring additional instructional space

is low, all that can be done is to try to impress on the instructors the necessity of contacting collection staff as early in the semester as possible.

The Future of the Assignment

There are several plans for the future of the assignment. The first is to continue to identify materials for digitization and inclusion within the Eastern North Carolina Digital Library to expand the available pool of online special collections resources. There is also a need to develop a more effective assessment tool for instructional sessions. Though a simple online assessment form is currently employed, student response to requests to fill out the form has been very low and a new approach is necessary to generate feedback needed to improve the assignment. In addition, staff from the North Carolina Collection are currently constructing online tutorials using Camtasia software that will allow students to learn some of the skills currently taught in the instructional sessions at the time of their choosing and at their own pace. Despite the minor problems that we have encountered with this project, it is hoped that this type of assignment, designed by librarians and institutional faculty, can serve as a model for future collaborations .

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