Reformation and Revolution: exploring how we think of the past through object-based and experiential learning

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This course portfolio details a collaboration between a history course, The Age of Religious Wars: Reformation Europe, 1500-1648, and Special Collections. Dr. Nicole Jobin, of History and Sewall RAP, and Dr. Susan Guinn-Chipman, of Special Collections, Archives, & Preservation, explore the potential for experiential and object-based learning to foster historical empathy and to affect how we think of the past.

Background

HIST 4212, The Age of Religious Wars: Reformation Europe, 1500-1648 examines the history of Europe from the end of the Hundred Years War through the Thirty Years War. Focused on a period of significant technological, religious, and social change in early modern Europe, the course lends itself to innovative approaches for studying the effects of the print revolution.

We have collaborated on bringing students from lower- and upper-division courses to Special Collections for many years but this course offered us the opportunity to deepen and extend that collaboration. It had been several years since Nicole Jobin last taught HIST 4212, which provided the opportunity to look at the course with fresh eyes and to make several changes. The narrower focus on the relationship of print to the Reformation began with an experiential learning component focused on print technology. Designed to engage directly with the topic, we featured a hands-on experience with the setting of moveable type and letterpress printing in Special Collections. Students’ study of the role of print in an era of reformation and religious warfare drew upon fifteenth- through seventeenth-century manuscripts, incunabula, and other early printed primary sources. By paging through and exploring these rare works, students would gain an understanding of these materials not only for their content but also for their importance as artifacts, creating an opportunity for object-based learning and the development of a historical empathy that complements more traditional, historical approaches to contextualization.

Implementation

Course goals were consulted in order to draw up more specific goals for three sets of visits to Special Collections, Archives, & Preservation (SCAP), University Libraries. During the first set of visits, Special Collections provided students a short introductory lecture on the shift from manuscript to the earliest works of print, or incunabula, and a hands-on type-setting workshop. The goals for these visits were an introduction to the print revolution through example and an opportunity to engage in hands-on experiential learning about the nature of letterpress printing. In the second and third sets of visits, students were given an opportunity to focus on the analysis
of one specific item for each visit related to the Reformation or the Religious Wars and their context. The goal for these visits was to encourage students to engage with the materiality of the items - to think about them as both useful for the information written in them and for the information that could be gathered from a physical examination of the item itself.

**Student Work**

Students in the 2018 spring semester of HIST 4212 The Age of Religious Wars: Reformation Europe 1500-1648 completed a series of worksheets and reflection questions about materials viewed during three sets of visits to Special Collections. They also were asked to write a research paper and present their research at a class mini-conference during the last two weeks of the semester. Most students chose topics that furthered their engagement with SCAP materials. Finally, they were given the chance to reflect on their experiences in a short essay final-exam question. Examples of each of these types of student work are given to demonstrate the ways in which the collaboration proved fruitful for student learning.

**Reflections**

We have been pleased with the results of our collaboration this semester. The student responses to their initial efforts in letterpress printing and to their close readings of rare works revealed thoughtful insights that spoke to the materiality of these manuscripts and texts, to the key role played by print in an era of change, and to the meaning and effects of multiple reformations. Our future collaborations, two slated for this coming Fall, will give us the opportunity to adapt some of our Special Collections sessions for slightly larger groups of lower division students. This opportunity has also provided us with a learning experience with which to gauge future changes to our model of instruction.

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- History
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**Tags:**

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- object-based learning
- primary source exploration
- special collections
Background

Special Collections, Archives, & Preservations’ instruction program engages students from the humanities, the sciences, education, and engineering with rare books and archival primary source materials critical to course curricula. This portfolio highlights Special Collections’ semester-long collaboration with HIST 4212, The Age of Religious Wars: Reformation Europe, 1500-1648, taught by Nicole Jobin.

The course studies the history of Europe from the end of the Hundred Years War through the Thirty Years War, examining the economic and intellectual effects of European exploration and expansion that changed Europeans’ sense of their place in the world and spurred competition between European nations. It pays particular attention to the dramatic results of the Protestant and Catholic Reformations that transformed both religious and political culture providing the roots of modern concepts of the family, education, notions of the independent nation-state, and limited religious tolerance. The course also examines social movements like the witch craze that demonstrate how such rapid transformation to the social, economic, and political landscape could create a climate of fear and persecution.

Nicole Jobin’s collaboration with Special Collections began in 2008, when her 1000- and 2000-level courses, taught through Sewall RAP, were introduced to the use of a selection of primary source materials relevant to their course of study. HIST 4212, an upper division history course restricted to sophomores, juniors, and seniors, offers Special Collections a chance to further enhance our collaborative, hands-on approach to learning through primary sources. Specifically, for this project, our collaboration asks to what degree can the close observation inherent in object-based learning foster an historical empathy and/or alter how we think of the past.

Several aspects of this course have undergone change this semester including a narrower focus on the relationship of the print revolution to the Reformation and the introduction of an experiential learning component focused on print technology designed to engage directly with the topic. Focused on a period of significant technological, religious, and social change in early modern Europe, HIST 4212 lends itself to innovative approaches to studying the print revolution. These include not only engagement with manuscripts, incunabula, and other early printed primary sources but also a hands-on experience with letterpress printing, including the setting of moveable type and the operation of small presses.
For Special Collections, this semester’s collaboration has offered the opportunity to implement a considered approach to object-based learning, focusing both on content and on the materiality of works as artifacts. We believe this synthesis engenders a “historical empathy,” a “cognitive and affective engagement” connecting students of the present with authors and ideas of the past, complementing more traditional, historical approaches to contextualization (Endacott and Brooks 2013, 41; Savenije & de Bruijn, 2017, 833-34). The materiality of Special Collections’ works is central to the hands-on, kinesthetic experience critical to fully engaged, active learning. In their critique of the traditional lack of opportunity for undergraduates to interact with archives and rare works, Helen J. Chatterjee, Leonie Hannan, and Linda Thomson have emphasized 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). It is with these recommendations in mind that we have embarked upon our collaboration aimed at an enhanced approach to engagement with rare works and with experiential learning in the form of an introduction to letterpress printing.

**Learning Outcomes**

The learning outcomes of HIST 4212, supported by a sequence of visits to Special Collections, are for students to be able to:

- identify key issues, individuals, and events relating to print culture and technologies; to the Protestant and Catholic-or Counter-Reformations; and to sixteenth- and seventeenth-century religious wars and related expansion
• understand how to locate, read, and use diverse primary sources as evidence in studying the past
• analyze the multiplicity of views from and about the past and to question assumptions
• understand and analyze some of the ways historians put the story of the past together
• ask good questions and to understand how to use some of the research tools and skills necessary to find the answers
• assess the relationship between text and image within the context of the early modern period through a process of object-based learning
• gain an understanding from examining the works as material culture through a process of object-based learning and to benefit from experiential, tactile, and haptic learning

Implementation

*The Age of Religious Wars: Reformation Europe*’s visits to Special Collections, Archives, & Preservation (SCAP) relied upon several teaching methods implemented over the course of a series of class sessions. During the students’ first series of two visits, a short, introductory lecture by SCAPs’ Sean Babbs presented a range of manuscript sources, including illuminated Books of Hours and Bible leaves to incunabula from printers such as Johann Gutenberg and Aldus Manutius. Designed to engage students, this session encouraged close examination and student reflection on the material and technological differences between manuscript and print production.

The second visit of this first series was more actively hands-on. Students learned the process of setting type, working in groups to print on a small tabletop flatbed press. Guided by SCAPs’ Gregory Robl, each student was also able to print a quote from John Milton’s *Areopagitica* (1644) on our c. 1900 Sigwalt press. The hands-on, letterpress instruction of this series was supported by training for Nicole Jobin and Susan Guinn-Chipman as part of a UROP grant awarded to Special Collections for 2017-18. The grant included a day of letterpress printing at the Book Arts League led by book artists and letterpress printers Julia Seko and Gregory Robl and funds for the purchase of Caslon typefaces, composing sticks, galleys, and fine, cotton paper.
Both visits drew upon students’ prior reading of Eamon Duffy’s work on fifteenth-century manuscript and book production and the use of primers, Books of Hours, and other devotional works read at varying levels of society during the early modern period. Questions posed during this sequence of two visits asked for student examination of the physical nature of these works and for their reflections on the relationship of social class and access to print, on the relationship of text and image, and on the technological and economic challenges of the earliest years of print production.

During the second series of visits, the students of HIST 4212 focused on Reformation-era manuscripts and printed works for both materiality and content. A deed from the English Court of Augmentations, proceedings from the Consistory Court of Norfolk, and printed primary sources by Martin Luther, Leo X, Henry VIII, John Foxe, Mathias Tanner, John Calvin, and Raphael Holinshed served as sources for a series of questions aimed at student reflection. Students considered the nature of these works as objects, their early modern audience, the relationship of text and image, and the effect of their content on Protestant and Catholic- or Counter-Reformation thought.
A third series of visits highlighted the long-term effects of Protestant and Catholic or Counter-Reformations. Printed seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century works by James I, Charles I, Wenceslaus Hollar, Joseph Glanville, Gerard Mercator, Arnoldus Montanus, J.B. DuHalde, the Catholic Church, and printed German and Algonquin-language Bibles encouraged student reflection. Students studied these works for evidence of religious tensions and wars triggered by religious reformations and the spread of these conflicts to new regions through exploration, colonization, and conversion.

Special Collections’ primary sources provided part of the research material for student papers and presentations in their end-of-semester class mini-conference Finding Meaning in the Era of the Reformation Past and Present. A short cumulative question on the final exam elicited student analysis of the change in the nature and use of printed materials over the era covered by the course.

Student Work

Students in the 2018 spring semester of HIST 4212 The Age of Religious Wars: Reformation Europe 1500-1648 completed a series of worksheets and reflection questions about materials viewed during three sets of visits to Norlin Library’s Special Collections, Archives, & Preservation (SCAP) department. They also were asked to write a research paper and present
their research at a mini-conference during the last two weeks of the semester. Finally they were given the chance to reflect on their experiences with SCAP materials in a short essay final exam question.

Students were given a form at the time of the first library visit requesting permission to use examples of their work for this portfolio and other research related to the class. Students who opted in were further given the choice of either having their name associated with their work or remaining anonymous. Separate permission on the same form was sought to use photographs from the course visits to the library and other class activities.

Visit #1 - Typesetting and the Transition From Manuscript to Print

Students were split into two groups for these visits. The first set of students were given a crash-course introduction to typesetting and asked to typeset a one or two line quotation or saying of their choice in groups of three or four students each. They printed these using a Triumph flatbed proof press. They were also given the opportunity to use the Sigwalt press, with SCAP’s Gregory Robl, to print a pre-set quote by John Milton. The second set of students were shown a variety of manuscript and print items in the SCAP reading room. After hearing a mini-lecture about the materials given by SCAP’s Sean Babbs, they were asked to fill in Library Visit #1 Worksheet. On the second class day of these visits, students were asked to switch to the activity they had not done in the previous class.
Examples from the print workshop:

These examples illustrate students having engaged with manuscript and print media from the 13th-16th centuries and the reflections engendered by the hands-on experience of setting letterpress type. The responses show varying degrees of connection between the physical experiences of both media and typesetting and the stated course goals to:

- Assess the relationship between text and image within the context of the early modern period through a process of object-based learning
- Gain an understanding from examining the works as material culture (object-based learning) and benefit from experiential, tactile, and haptic learning.

Example #1: Nick Bradford
Visit #2 - Documents of the Reformation as Text and Object

Students in this visit were brought to the SCAP reading room and exposed to a variety of works, mainly printed with a small number of manuscript items, relating to the spreading of ideas during the early Reformation. After a simple introduction, students were asked to select a single item to examine closely. They then answered questions on the Library Visit #2 Worksheet about the item as both object and text and then placed the item into its historical context using knowledge gained from the class readings, discussion, and lectures. This type of source examination links object-based learning to discipline specific expectations about how students should engage with primary source materials. In the class following the library visits, a class discussion was held around another set of reflection questions and student comments were recorded in a document published to the class LMS site which is shown below.

Examples of Student Worksheet Answers

Example #1: Anonymous Student #3

Example #2: Ben Klase

Example #3: Jesse Dole

The level of detail in all these worksheet answers has increased as compared to the first worksheet, particularly in the descriptions of the item as object. The details are recorded, and also to some extent commented on again, when placing the item into historical context. This highlights one of the important ways using original primary sources differs from approaching these same texts as digitized transcriptions or as excerpts in primary source collections.

The Reflection Question Discussion Capture following Library Visit #2

Visit #3 - Documents of the Religious Wars

This visit to the SCAP reading room followed the same format as the second visit, only this time the printed works students examined were related to the propaganda, pamphleteering, and official publications of the Religious Wars along with items relating to the religious divide between Protestants and Catholics spreading through missionary work to Asia and the New World, and the witch craze.
Examples of Student Worksheet Answers

Example #1: Gabriella Ramirez
Example #2: Danny Weinstock
Example #3: Anonymous Student #4

Reflection Questions following Library Visit #3

Example #1: Andrew Haley
Example #2: Anonymous Student #4
Example #3: Danny Weinstock
Example #4: Ben Klase

Taken as a whole, these examples demonstrate how students were able to put all three library experiences together in order to draw a picture of change in print materials, their use, and audience over time.

Papers and Presentations

Students in HIST 4212 were asked to come up with a research paper topic that would fit in to our end-of-semester class mini-conference Finding Meaning in the Era of the Reformation Past and Present. This mini-conference was designed to have students put their reading of primary sources to work as part of the research for an analytical research paper. It also gave students an opportunity to explore ways of communicating their research to others beyond the simple act of completing the paper. The presentation options were designed to be similar to a professional history conference experience including a poster/media session, panel discussions, and traditional paper presentation sessions.

As can be seen in the excerpts below, students made use of primary sources they located during their visits to Special Collections as well as other scholarly works and additional primary source material located in the library or online. We have tried to present excerpts here that demonstrate student work, while not publishing the papers in their entirety.

Example #1: Gabriella Ramirez
Example #2: Jesse Dole

Example #3: Ben Klase
Final Exam Reflection Question

On the final exam, we gave students the opportunity for one last reflection on their experiences with the items we had explored in Special Collections, Archives, & Preservation. This question was one of two choices for the cumulative short-essay section of the exam. The following examples struck us as particularly useful in illustrating both the language and presentation of ideas that clued us in to students having achieved the hoped-for goals on engagement with sources beyond the merely textual level.

Example #1: Ben Klase

Example #4: Andrew Haley

Example #5: Danny Weinstock
In the midst of class visits to Special Collections, it is easy for us to become preoccupied with guiding students in their exploration of rare books and manuscripts and with responding to student inquiries, important macro-level interactions that constitute the mechanics and practices of instructing students in the use of these rare primary sources. Amid the busy ebb and flow of the activity of learning, it is all too easy to miss the immersive, haptic, micro-level interactions that sometimes take place between the student and the past. The smell and the touch of the paper and the turning of the pages reveal - one page at a time – the scribes, authors, engravers, and owners of past generations: others who had touched these manuscripts and books before them. It is the kinesthetic, experiential learning that we hope forms a part of the students' experience, but that we do not always recognize in the moment. Sometimes the evidence for object-based learning is elusive, lost in a din of activity. Sometimes those moments of “historical empathy” and “cognitive and affective engagement” go unnoticed.
Our collaboration with Nicole Jobin’s *The Age of Religious Wars: Reformation Europe 1500-1648* has reminded me to slow down, to watch and to listen more carefully for these moments, and to be sure to allow time for students to take a deep breath and to engage with the past.

At the core of what we hoped to learn this semester is how such engagement or close observation can foster historical empathy and affect how we think of the past. The students’ reflections have been enlightening. Student discussions highlighted the importance of the physical object, in their words, the intimacy and the immediacy of a “pure experience or understanding” that, combined with others’ interpretations, provides a “whole picture.” Ben Klase’s observation that our *Doctrina, Vita et Passio Jesu Christi* (1537) was printed and bound with one woodcut upside down, another student’s notation of the family of Puritan Samuel Bulls’ signatures that appear throughout our copy of Foxe’s *Actes and Monuments* (1596), and another’s description of our *Mercator Atlas sive Cosmographicae* (1630) described as “well worn and well loved with rough and thumbprinted [sic] pages,” reflect such close examination.

The students’ efforts to empathize or connect with a centuries-old past were striking. Placing the past into the context of the present, Danny Weinstock compared Wenceslaus Hollar’s etched map of the English Civil War and the Battle of Prague to a “modern day graphic novel” in which sequential images are labeled to tell the story of battles separated by hundreds of miles and by divergent religious and political interests. This sort of analogous thinking likewise appeared during class discussion. One student related that, in conversation with her roommate, the two compared the experience of encounters with rare books and manuscripts to the experience of an integrated physiology lab. They likened engagement with these rare sources to holding organs and touching the interior parts of the body: in both cases, they agreed, one is holding life. We could not have worded it better.

I have been so pleased with the student responses to our collaboration. From their initial efforts in letterpress printing – always a challenge that requires a cheerful approach – to their close readings of the material culture of over two hundred years, the students have provided thoughtful insights that speak to both the relevance of the development of print in an era of change and to the meaning of multiple reformations.
As we move forward, accomplishing the same degree of experiential learning with future classes will present a challenge. This collaboration benefited from six visits to Special Collections in order to allow for smaller groups of twelve to fourteen students, a necessity for both the letterpress print workshop and for the type of in-depth analysis of manuscripts and rare works undertaken by the students. Our department has participated in extensive collaborations with multiple visits with, for example, Thora Brylowe of the English Department and Danny Long of the Program for Writing and Rhetoric, both also represented by *Making Teaching and Learning Visible* portfolios. All three collaborations have offered the chance to explore new pedagogical approaches related to object-based and experiential learning. They have also provided logistical challenges, as we balance inspiration, ideas, and goals with the realities of limited space, time, and staff.

The challenge for Special Collections in planning future course collaborations will be to use Nicole Jobin’s *The Age of Religious Wars: Reformation Europe 1500-1648* as a model, replicating what we can, scaling down when necessary, and scaling up when possible. Fall semester, Nicole and I will have the chance to put this into practice by applying what we have learned to two lower division classes, each of which will visit only twice. Collaborating on this portfolio has provided us with the chance to think through how best to retain what is most important as we explore with the students how we think of the past.

**Nicole Jobin**

My relationship with Special Collections at Norlin Library goes back through ten years of classes, many of them exclusively lower-division for first-year students. Though this is not our first collaboration for an upper-division course, it has probably been the most rewarding to date in terms of the impact on student research and discovery. By increasing the focus on the Special Collections items as objects, I feel like we opened up a new level of analysis to students that gave them a much more visceral experience of the past. Initially I was slightly worried that
having two follow up visits (instead of one), beyond the introduction and print workshop, would end up having diminishing returns. Instead it was obvious that student engagement with the items was deepening rather than diminishing. The observations on our third visit, and again in the papers or on the final exam answers, were more detailed and demonstrated a new habit of mind: thinking of the rare book, map, pamphlet, or court document as more than just the words contained on a page. This attention to materiality was far more developed than I had seen in previous courses with a writing component related to a SCAP visit.

As Susan Guinn-Chipman has so eloquently stated, student efforts to empathize with the past were striking. Several students told me informally, in discussion before or after class for instance, that something they had seen or touched gave them a new way of looking at a particular topic we had seen in our class readings. These off-hand observations are impossible to collect for a portfolio such as this, as they frequently happen walking down a hallway or during the rush to gather materials together to vacate a classroom, but they helped confirm for me that we are onto something in the way we constructed these visits and assignments.

As Susan mentioned above, the next challenge is to bring some of the same benefits to lower division courses where we often do not have the ability to schedule the larger number of library visits made in HIST 4212. Another challenge is the level of background knowledge students bring into a lower-division course. In an upper-division course, where more than half your students are likely to be history majors or minors, students already come in primed for some of the habits of mind and exploration we were encouraging. I firmly believe that an introductory, or survey-type, history course should provide the same kind of exciting opportunities for discovery. Maybe for this introductory level new ways of thinking are even more important. I look forward to developing assignments to use with the European History survey sequence next year together with Susan and her other wonderful colleagues in SCAP to see if we can bring some of the same sense of touching the past, or “holding life” as Bethany put it, alive for this new cohort of students.