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CHAPTER 12*

What Is Possible

Setting the Stage for Co-Exploration in Archives and Special Collections

Patrick Williams

AUDRE LORDE TELLS US we learn from “that interaction that takes place in the spaces between what is in the book and ourselves.”¹ As librarians engaged in critical pedagogical practice, we seek ways to make visible these hidden interactions, whether between learners and their books, searchers and their interfaces, or students and their institutions. The speed with which today’s researchers encounter and make use of information can distract from their ability to be attentive to and critical of these interactions. In my own information literacy instruction, I have struggled to foreground those meaningful, personal interactions and critical questions against all that competes with our attention and our priorities in library computer labs, classrooms, and every other setting for one-shot library instruction. It eventually occurred to me that a change of venue was necessary.

In recent years, I have found that my most satisfying experiences have taken place within a research environment with which everyone—myself, my collaborators, students, and instructors—is less familiar: the sixth-floor classroom of the Special Collections Research Center at Syracuse University’s Bird Library. This is a space of possibility, remade for each session with a unique combination of materials, people, and questions. In this chapter, I will describe the ways in which I think teaching with archival materials, rare books and printed works, and other special collections can help us to engage in critical,

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co-exploratory instruction and can draw out the interactions between “what is in the book” and what we and others bring to the space.

I am a subject specialist librarian who concentrates on research support and instruction in a handful of humanities disciplines. I am indebted to the curators, librarians, and staff in my own institution’s Special Collections Research Center for the access, the support, and the trust that carrying out these instructional sessions requires. I also acknowledge the considerable privilege of my position in a library with rich special collections holdings; many librarians do not have access to such resources, and these resources have guided and enabled what I choose to do.

Personal Overlays on Local Publics

For a recent first-year writing course with the topic of inquiry “Syracuse as Place,” I laid out a variety of primary materials focused on housing, mobility, culture, and commerce throughout about 300 years of our region’s history. While students circulated, I watched as several crowded around the largest items in the room, two volumes of Sanborn Insurance Maps (roughly 30 inches by 24 inches), featuring maps of the area surrounding the university. These are heavy books, full of thick pages layered with pasted-on addenda and revisions spanning from 1910 to 1928, and they are difficult to work with. Still, students chose these items to hover around, exploring the pages and talking with one another. One student searched for his off-campus rental house. Another found a neighborhood of long-disappeared sorority and fraternity houses where the new Life Sciences and Science and Technology Complex stands. Another found the 15th Ward, a working-class, predominantly African American neighborhood between our campus and downtown that was demolished when Interstate 81 bisected our city in the 1960s. Another pointed out the density of factories in the now-desolate pockets of the Near West Side. A local student noted that the high school his brother attended was formerly the site of a sanatorium. The observations and questions that arose out of this impromptu geography discussion made palpable the interactions in the spaces between these hundred-year-old books and the young people using them; each student’s perspective and experience overlaid on the map of our city in complementary, personal ways. We considered what the other items in the room, in the collection, and online could tell us about these questions. We checked addresses on smartphones and visualized spaces with Google Maps on the room’s projection screen. We even discussed how the Sanborn maps, which were designed for fire insurance purposes, were also used as tools of systematic discrimination and oppression. This last topic led to a discussion of the other types of information among the items in the room

we might find that tell us stories of silenced and marginalized voices, contested spaces, or imbalances of power.

Critical Library Instruction and Archival Collections

Working in the archive necessarily slows us down, introducing us to more *visible* uncertainty, making space for problem posing, and providing an almost thrilling freedom from any easy answer. Elizabeth Yakel and Deborah Torres note that “most archival inquiries represent unstructured problems,” and they define “archival intelligence” as something buttressed by, but independent from, information literacy.² I believe that the gaps and overlaps among the concepts of archival intelligence and information literacy create a tension that positions archival spaces as ideal sites for critical inquiry and reflection around how we understand and experience information. These spaces offer opportunities to both ask “what is possible?” and to imagine what is possible in our immediate context.

Archives and special collections have been less frequently involved in student instruction than in other spaces in academic libraries; quite often educational endeavors have been focused on collection treasures or employed to wow boards of trustees or justify expense.³ But there is a growing literature on using archives in undergraduate research and on critical, student-centered approaches for doing so. Bianca Falbo points to the types of experiences that are driving moves toward hands-on archival instruction in special collections: “Confronted with the odd or unusual artifact, students must reconsider what they know about the work of reading and writing about their experience making sense of a text.”⁴ Lisa Hooper proposes that “rather than presenting a class with documents from which a unified, uncontested story may be derived, the archivist should consciously work to provide documents from a broad spectrum of perspectives that not only challenge their own authoritative legitimacy, but also provide insights into events from the perspective of the subaltern and Other in addition to that of the dominant force.”⁵

This encounter with uncertainty, this necessary reconsideration with one’s relationship to reading and writing, is something I believe to be a very important precondition for critical information literacy. I believe the spaces in which archival collections are held, preserved, and used; the way in which we access them; the labor involved in making them accessible; and even their very existence orient students toward a productive uncertainty and transferable critical approach to all of their information work.

Literal Boxes and Concrete Walls

Archives and special collections spaces are often perceived to be less accessible, less welcoming, and less relevant to undergraduate students than more traditional library spaces like stacks, computer clusters, or databases. The collections, of course, are also quite different: rare books and manuscript collections are largely not digitized or available for full-text searching, they are described minimally and with specialized vocabulary, and they may fail to meet the criteria students expect to see as sources of information or objects of inquiry. It is this opportunity to grapple with what a source is or can be, I think, that makes archives and special collections fruitful spaces for the co-exploration of information literacy.

Cushla Kapitzke identified three misconceptions about resource and information use in school settings: that libraries provide neutral services; that a student is “an autonomous individual”; and, finally, that “language is a transparent conduit for the transmission of meaning in information.”⁶ Instruction in the unfamiliar environment of special collections and archives, among uniform boxes and oddly shaped books pulled from unseen collections, provides a position from which students can observe and encounter the contexts, the people, and the organizational systems in which their research is necessarily enmeshed. They must use finding aids that offer abbreviated descriptions of materials and that may employ unfamiliar conventions and terminology; they must request that materials be physically brought out to them by a staff member; they must make decisions about what they request and view based on concerns of space and time.

The labor involved in selecting, maintaining, describing, and even paging these materials becomes apparent to students in a way the unseen work behind catalogs and other databases does not. The rule-based, restricted nature of these spaces constitutes intentional barriers to information that are much more visible than the paywalls a student may or may not encounter.

Work in archives offers opportunities to draw attention to the ways in which problems of physical archival practice are replicated, increased, and hidden in our contemporary systems for locating, evaluating, making use of, and preserving information. Students can become familiar with the biases and gaps in information systems and in their own approaches to research. These discussions allow us to question the ways in which information systems might hide as much as they reveal.

Furthermore, we can explore the ways in which researchers’ experience with information is mediated by our professional practice. The increased visibility of mediation by others we experience in physical collections can scaffold our conversations with students about the affordances and constraints of information in electronic collections and databases, about the corporations from whom they are licensed, and about institutional privilege.

Reaching Out to Co-Explorers

Both James Elmborg and Heidi Jacobs have demonstrated connections between the goals of critical information literacy instruction and the field of composition and rhetoric.⁷ I've found faculty and graduate students who teach in that discipline to be enthusiastic about the open-ended co-exploration archival- and special-collections-based instruction and assignments provide. I've developed my approach through sessions in composition and writing courses that have taken as their topics inquiry campus activism, cultural perceptions of drug use, do-it-yourself publishing, youth culture, and writing cultures. These sessions share the goals of introducing students to research from an artifactual perspective and helping them to identify items of interest for use in their own course-related research. These collaborations have resulted in as diverse a set of assignment outputs—from traditional papers and presentations, to zines, to student-authored museum labels—as are available in the collections.

Based on the work in those writing courses, I have also collaborated with faculty and students in courses from other disciplines on sessions covering topics including comics and graphic literature, slavery and abolition, and the history of the book. What I have found is that, regardless of the course or assignment to which the session is tied, the opportunity to co-explore gives students a chance to be attentive to what they notice, to acknowledge a variety of interpretations of materials in the room, and to ask new questions about the sources at play in the larger contexts of course and subject area.

Making Space for Mess

Jacobs proposes a “messier” view of information literacy in literary studies that is emblematic of an openness toward more diverse pedagogical and curricular practices.⁸ For new researchers, archival research is almost necessarily inefficient and inconvenient, even frustrating, and the degree to which it contrasts with the types of research undergraduate students are more accustomed to can create useful friction.

My approach to these sessions demands taking the initiative with faculty to assist in the design of curriculum that draws on the unique strengths of the archives and special collections environment. Through consultation with the instructor, I develop a diverse group of items related to the topic of the class that model the types of sources the instructor would like students to consider. Because I am a subject librarian who does not spend most of my time among these collections, the design of these sessions also involves collaboration with our special collections librarians, curators, and other staff. This means that I benefit from their collections expertise through planning with them, but it

also demands coordination and an attentiveness to another department's staff time and resources.

In contrast, the sessions in the special collection classroom are themselves quite unstructured. When I welcome students into the space, I give a brief introduction and I try to quickly get everyone comfortable handling materials. Students spend the bulk of the session exploring, reading, taking notes, and talking about the materials among themselves. I encourage them to move slowly about the room, zeroing in on the items that pique their interest. I emphasize that we are co-explorers, attempting to examine and make meaning from these items ourselves, in the context of space, and in the context of this class.

I then invite students to talk about a personally resonant object, observation, or discovery, and with the document camera, to point out and reflect on what they noticed. Ceding control of the session to the observations and interests of students centers the pedagogical experience on them, and exemplifies the liminal, collaborative space librarians can occupy, as Joshua Beatty presents it, as “allies and helpers—as facilitators rather than authorities.”⁹

One important part of this work is situating myself as a librarian—not the students' instructor, not the archivists and catalogers selecting and describing this material, not the other students who are in the library because they were told to be. Nora Almeida identifies the outsider status of librarians as a “helpful critical frame” for pedagogy and notes that “Librarians, because they understand the socio-political underpinnings of information, because they are rhetorically limber and disciplinarily agnostic, and because they authentically want students to gain critical literacy skills and agency, can and should serve as mediators.”¹⁰ This outsider status gives students permission to explore, comfortably pose both naive and sophisticated questions, and engage in co-exploration. I also believe that this positionality disrupts the instructor's intellectual authority and allows faculty to work more collaboratively with students during the session. The intermingling of student, faculty, and librarian perspectives in the room can additionally serve to highlight the mediated, conversational, and socially constructed nature of scholarly research.

Some Discoveries and Discussions

Jacobs demonstrates how posing problems through three frames of exploration—“problems of cataloguing and classification,” “problems of literary information,” and “problems of the library”—can provide librarians with the opportunity to ask students new questions within the familiar constraints of the information literacy class session.¹¹ I believe these frames are quite useful in the archival and special collections settings as well. The ways in which our

work is slowed and refocused in those settings allow us to investigate cataloging and classification, literary information, and the library itself in much more concrete ways than in environments focused on electronic resources and search interfaces. Below, I will share some brief examples of ways in which these frames have led to conversations and discoveries in these co-exploratory sessions.

Problems of Cataloging and Classification

In our climate that assumes full-text digitization and overemphasizes search as the single route to discovery, archival finding aids are quite unfamiliar to students. But with their concise, functional description, they can be instructive of the “problems of cataloging and classification” toward which Jacobs refers.

In a writing course on do-it-yourself publishing, after initial encounters with material in the special collections classroom, I engaged students in an open discussion of how they might use our catalog and our finding aids to identify items that might embody the ethos of DIY publishing. This highly subjective dimension often escapes literal representation in finding aids. Furthermore, the students in the class were themselves still formulating what they considered DIY to be. But, as a group, reflecting on the materials we handled, we brainstormed lists of potential search terms for the finding aids that might describe items or collections that contained suitable materials. These terms covered genre and format (zine, booklet, newsletter), process (letterpress, photocopy, handmade, stapled), and paratextual elements (inscribed, collaged, postage)—all things that might influence or be influenced by the content of the item, but not the usual facet upon which their search process hinges. Collaboratively translating the DIY ethos into the language of archival description presented the finding aids as incomplete, subjective, and merely a starting place for tracing research questions to sources.

Problems of Literary Information

Jacobs points out that a problem-posing approach can help students begin to see “decisions regarding what gets digitized, what gets discarded, what gets collected, anthologized, and preserved, how literary history is told, and to whom it is made accessible [reveal] a great deal about what a particular society, group, culture, or individual values or anticipates will be valuable.”¹²

In session for Poetry of Struggle, a writing-intensive course for first-year students, the instructor and I chose to concentrate on protest poetry in its original published forms. Thanks to our curators’ work in building collection strengths in activism and social reform, many of the items we handled were

books, chapbooks, and broadsides from the Broadside Press, Detroit poet, publisher, and librarian Dudley Randall's endeavor to increase the volume of books published in the late 1960s and early 1970s by poets of color.¹³ Students in this class were familiar with the work of poets like Gwendolyn Brooks, Nikki Giovanni, and Amiri Baraka from the anthologies they were assigned, the PDF readings in the course management system and on their syllabi. But to see the work of these poets, enmeshed in the social constellation of printed materials bearing Broadside's distinctive design, sharing editors and preface authors, and with dedications to and poems about one another, the students started to find links among the works and their prominent and lesser-known authors and began to deanthologize these poets back into their richer historical contexts.

Problems of the Library

Awareness of the rules and procedures for using archives, registering, using finding aids, paging materials, using pencils and paper supplied by the archive, even writing legibly on call slips, all attune students to the people working behind the scenes. Engaging with archival material necessitates attention to the mediated, iterative process of doing research that is often hidden by search interfaces whose commercial proposition is tied to their perceived frictionlessness. I take every opportunity to investigate these mediations, and students are quick to notice them on their own. The common misconceptions about researchers, libraries, and systems that Kapitzke outlined fall apart under the scrutiny of students in archival and special collections spaces. During these sessions, students are confronted with the fact that, as researchers, they are not autonomous actors in navigating neutral systems in which language provides direct, transparent access to information. Students come away from these sessions with an understanding that systems of publishing, systems of organization, and systems of access are not neutral, naturally occurring, or without specific, contextual strengths and weaknesses.

Between Sources and Selves

Michelle Reale recounts the alarming-but-familiar experience of realizing that students in an information literacy session have little confidence in their own knowledge, that "they don't understand that research is a process and they do not need to have the 'right' answer."¹⁴ In my experiences working with groups of students in special collections, this emphasis on supplying answers seems to be relieved by overwhelming impulse to notice the odd or unexpected attributes of the materials with which we share space. The disruptive effects of the

artifacts in the room free us to explore differences together and keep us from viewing these potential sources as equal, congruent, or independent of their own contexts.

Moreover, when we experience each other's personal speculations and special expertise in an open, dynamic, and social space, we are able to serve as guides to one another, to challenge each other, and build on our shared context. Because of their own novel attributes and their tangible connections to other items, communities, and systems, archives and special collections force us to pay attention to the interactions that happen in the spaces between sources and ourselves. The slow, sustained, and reflective methods that archival collections demand can help our students move from asking "what is possible?" to claiming their authority and demonstrating their capabilities to define what is possible for themselves.

Notes

1. Joan Wylie Hall, *Conversations with Audre Lorde*. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004), 152.
2. Elizabeth Yakel and Deborah A. Torres, "AI: Archival Intelligence and User Expertise," *American Archivist* 66, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2003): 69. doi:10.17723/aarc.66.1.q022h85pn51n5800.
3. Steven Escar Smith, "From 'Treasure Room' to 'School Room': Special Collections and Education," *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Cultural Heritage* 7, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 32.
4. Bianca Falbo, "Teaching from the Archives," *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Cultural Heritage* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 34.
5. Lisa Hooper, "Breaking the Ontological Mold: Bringing Postmodernism and Critical Pedagogy into Archival Educational Programming," in *Critical Library Instruction*, ed. Maria T. Accardi, Emily Drabinski, and Alana Kumbier (Duluth, MN: Library Juice Press, 2010), 36.
6. Cushla Kapitzke, "Information Literacy: A Positivist Epistemology and a Politics of Outformation," *Educational Theory* 53, no. 1 (Winter 2003): 45.
7. James Elmborg, "Critical Information Literacy: Implications for Instructional Practice," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 32, no. 2 (March 2006): 193; Heidi L. M. Jacobs, "Information Literacy and Reflective Pedagogical Praxis," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 34, no. 3 (May 2008): 256–62.
8. Heidi L. M. Jacobs, "Pedagogies of Possibility within the Disciplines: Critical Information Literacy and Literatures in English," *Communications in Information Literacy* 8, no. 2 (January 12, 2014): 198.
9. Joshua Beatty, "Locating Information Literacy within Institutional Oppression," *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*, September 24, 2014, <http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2014/locating-information-literacy-within-institutional-oppression>.
10. Nora Almeida, "Librarian as Outsider," *Hybrid Pedagogy*, July 7, 2015, <http://www.hybridpedagogy.com/journal/librarian-as-outsider>.
11. Jacobs, "Pedagogies of Possibility," 198.

12. Ibid., 200.
13. Melba Joyce Boyd, *Wrestling with the Muse* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 3.
14. Michelle Reale, "Critical Pedagogy in the Classroom: Library Instruction That Gives Voice to Students and Builds a Community of Scholars," *Journal of Library Innovation* 3, no. 2 (August 21, 2012): 81.

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