“Wow-I Can Touch That?”
Using Special Collections to Expand Information Literacy

Catherine Rod and Phil Jones

What happens when undergraduates get their hands on a nineteenth-century stereoscope, a first edition of Tom Jones, and 100-year-old student handbooks during an information literacy session? What do these students learn through analyzing primary sources that can sharpen their responses to other kinds of evidence? To address these questions, participants in this interactive workshop at the LOEX 2010 conference recreated an instruction session developed by librarians and disciplinary faculty members at Grinnell College using surrogates of primary sources to prompt discussion of any source’s audience, authorship, reliability, and purpose. Before recreating this primary source “experience,” participants received brief profiles of information literacy at Grinnell College and Library 100, a semester-length research skills class taught by librarians and the starting point for this series of primary source sessions. This workshop also included discussion of how these sessions expanded across Grinnell’s curriculum. Lastly, participants received lists of questions for students to consider when using primary evidence and a planning document to help articulate ways their own college or university special collections might be used to expand information literacy instruction.

First, we will provide context for this collaborative information literacy effort. Grinnell College is a residential liberal arts college of approximately 1,600 students located in Grinnell, Iowa, offering 26 academic majors and 11 interdisciplinary concentrations. Our college enjoys a 9:1 student to faculty ratio and takes pride in its individually mentored curriculum with no core requirements after the Tutorial, our first-semester seminar which focuses on writing, critical reading, oral communication, and information literacy. Grinnell College Libraries is comprised of Burling Library and Kistle Science Library, 8 Librarians, 2 administrative staff, 14 support staff, and 70+ student staff members. Our collections, including government documents, consist of 775,000 volumes; our special collections are comprised of 8,000 volumes, plus our Manuscript Collection and the College Archives. The foundation for these primary source sessions comes from the conception of information literacy as “critical reflection on the nature of information itself, its technical infrastructure, and its social, cultural and even philosophical context and impact…” (Shapiro, 31).

Our starting point for these sessions was Library Research Techniques (Library 100), a semester-length, elective class Grinnell’s librarians have taught for over 25 years. The course meets twice a week for 50 minutes and provides up to 12 students from the College’s three academic divisions an opportunity to explore, develop and refine their own research process by using a variety of research tools, strategies, and resources—including special collections. Library 100 is organized by one librarian, but many sessions are collaboratively designed and taught by two librarians.

Over the course of three years in Library 100, we have developed a two-session sequence to intrigue our students with a rich sampling of primary sources held in the College’s archival, rare book, and manuscript collections. These sessions take place in the second half of the semester and in preparation, students read a helpful chapter entitled “Primary Sources: Online Tools and Digitized Collections” in the course text (Stebbins, p. 61-83). During the first session, each student works with one primary source (a photograph, a letter, a map, a book) and answers three questions:

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Students are guided, printed books) have very definite effects on things like dissemination about how different textual media (i.e. manuscripts and of literacy. “My main idea,” said Harrison, “is to get students later about how the works may have been used, their intended to explore the sources on their own, to ask questions, and to speculate about what they would learn if they examined each format for what they could study. Students like that digital formats allow them to access the material at any time from their computers, search the text for particular occurrences of a single word, and print specific pages to then mark with their observations. Students respond differently to the physical text, noticing its size and weight, how it was bound, and what these features might indicate about the status of the owner. Some of the examples contain marginalia that would indicate how the reader responded to the text or were signed or stamped by their owners, thus providing us an opportunity to discuss provenance and authenticity. Students learn from the artifact itself and respond to more than its textual content, which is an important goal for this session.

The reaction of these students led us to consider how other classes might benefit from a similar session. The opportunity to do so came when David Harrison, a professor of French, asked to bring his seminar to Special Collections to look at examples of books printed throughout the past 450 years so his students could get an idea of the changes in European print culture. Together we planned a session using examples from our Rare Book collection, including many sources in languages other than French. Some of the titles included Herolt’s Sermons Discipliui de Tempore, et de Sacris (1477), Montaigne’s Essays (1613), Sterne’s A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy (1768), Recueil des lettres de Madame la Marquise de Sévigné (1803), Planta’s A New Picture of Paris (1831) and Dickens’ David Copperfield (1849-50).

Prof. Harrison provided a brief list of questions (see appended handout) for students to consider as they examined the books. Following a brief introduction to the protocols of using materials in Special Collections, the students were allowed to explore the sources on their own, to ask questions, and to speculate about how the works may have been used, their intended audience, and what their format indicated about the spread of literacy. “My main idea,” said Harrison, “is to get students thinking about how different textual media (i.e. manuscripts and printed books) have very definite effects on things like dissemination of knowledge, status of authorship, fame, etc.”

Prof. Harrison has continued to incorporate this experience into his seminar. Because of the positive feedback from both students and faculty, we have expanded these primary source sessions to first-year seminars, the introductory history course, and advanced courses in history, education, environmental studies, and English literature. While some courses drew from our collection of rare books, this primary source experience is equally successful using materials from other archival collections that most colleges retain. For example, Shanna Benjamin, an English professor, taught a first-year seminar with a focus on “Why Manners Matter: Reading Culture Through Style and Etiquette.” Our rare books collection did not have sufficient examples of etiquette or manners books, so we selected examples of student handbooks, yearbooks, and scrapbooks to provide Prof. Benjamin’s class with a look at behavior and manners of Grinnell College students over time. This session proved to be very lively. Students would burst out laughing and then read to the entire class “rules” about dancing, dorm visitation, and proper attire. Prof. Benjamin was able to then address broader issues of gender, race, and class that found expression through the language, expectations, and disciplinary actions in these sample sources.

In Deborah Michael’s upper-level History of Education course, students examined early textbooks and readers, school superintendent’s reports, early correspondence and recollections about schooling in Grinnell, photographs of schoolrooms, and the college curriculum for teacher training. Students were asked to analyze these texts and images for what they said about the purpose of education, Bible debates, corporal punishment, gender differences, and more. Following this session, students were asked to comment on how the texts supported, countered, or complicated the picture of education that arose from their previous course readings. Prof. Michaels reported that students’ responses to the session were overwhelmingly positive. One student wrote: “I think the library day was really engaging and interesting. The documents were exciting to see and being able to see physical documents of texts that we are studying [in class] was helpful and rewarding....These illustrations really concretized the things we talked about [in class].”

The experience we re-created for the LOEX Conference was an amalgamation of three sessions: one using materials from the College Archives that supported the “Manners” class session; one based on materials from the rare book collection used in an upper-level “Renaissance and Reformation” history course; and one using a variety of local sources from the introductory level “Making History” course. Because we were not able to bring the actual items to the conference, we created surrogates that could be distributed among the groups. The participants were divided into four groups and asked to assume two roles—that of a student in a course session, and that of an information literacy instructor. We then asked participants what observations they would make as students, looking for such things as when the item was created, who created it, how it was intended to be used, who would have used it, and what evidence they used to form these conclusions. As instructors, we asked participants to consider what primary sources they have access to in their libraries, what questions would they want to ask, what barriers to this activity exist at their institution (space staff, re-
sources, and condition of materials), and what would they want their students to learn.

The presenters went from group to group to listen and to answer occasional questions about the surrogates. We also asked questions to prompt participants to look at particular features of the surrogate sources. For example, what does a large, oak-bound book of sermons printed in the 15th century (see appended image) suggest about who might have used it and how? Was it likely to be used by an individual scholar or a religious community? Was it portable or likely to have remained in one place? How does it resemble or differ from the example of a manuscript codex? What does the first publication of Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield*, printed in inexpensive installments, suggest about the audience for Dickens’ works and the growth of a reading public?

The questions that arose from the groups were wide-ranging. One of the first was, “Can students really touch these—do you require the use of gloves?” We regard our collection as a teaching collection. We want students to be exposed to primary sources, to be encouraged to use them for research, and to appreciate the importance of printed material as evidence of more than intellectual content. So yes, students really can touch the items, and we do not require that they use gloves. We only require that patrons have clean hands.

A few participants asked how we know who wrote some of these texts, and how did these works come to be in our collection? These are the same questions our students struggle with, and we use this as an opportunity to address issues of source evaluation and the social and cultural context in which information was (and is) produced. Another question was whether first-year students can really engage with this material. Our experience is that they can and do. While students in a senior seminar may be better able to make more nuanced observations, first-year students are able to ask thoughtful questions and make keen observations about the material. One of the keys to student engagement at any level is the involvement and interest of the course instructor. Their active participation is key to the success of any instruction session, regardless of course level or age of students.

A few of the session participants stated that they create and use surrogates of primary sources for this type of instruction on a regular basis at their own academic libraries. At Grinnell, we think the use of authentic objects is critical since the surrogate cannot provide the same kind of information that the object itself does. The limitations of surrogates were evident in the workshop exercise. Participants commented frequently that they wished they could see the actual book in order to understand what it really encompassed—how many pages it had, how it was organized, how the book was constructed, etc. We think that using the authentic item provides the best experience for our students.

The use of materials from special collections offers an engaging way to incorporate information literacy concepts into instruction sessions. The sessions modeled in this presentation may be adapted to a number of teaching situations and collections. Our experiences in both the primary source sessions profiled here and their LOEX recreations was that students and participants responded well to use of materials from our college archive, special collections, and a primary source database. Authentic artifacts such as these have both great appeal and power to enhance all our students’ learning.


**Works Cited**


APPENDIX: HANDOUT

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LOEX Annual Conference 2010

Your Turn: Planning Primary Source Information Literacy Sessions

- What collections does your institution have that would lend themselves to this kind of instruction?

- What information literacy concepts would you like to address through primary sources?

- What courses are most likely to benefit from direct experience with primary sources?

- Who are your collaborators?

Other considerations: list and share during today’s discussion

Sample Questions for Primary Source Information Literacy Sessions

i) What is the item?

ii) Why would a library keep this item?

iii) What did you learn from reviewing this source?

- Examine each item carefully.
- Can you determine when it was created and who created it?
- How do you think it was intended to be used and by whom?
- What evidence do you have for your assumptions?
- How might it be used today and what could you learn from it?
Atelier à Burling Library
In groups of four, examine the collection of books that are placed in your section of the table. With each book, discuss the following questions:

1. What are the contents of the book? In what language is it written? Based on the contents of the book, who do you think is the intended reader of the book?

2. Look at the title page or initial pages of the book: can you find out who wrote the book and who published it? Does the title page suggest that a certain authority was necessary to get the book published? Is the book dedicated to anyone?

3. How would you describe the book’s physical structure (size, binding, etc.)? Does the book’s physical structure give any clues about the reader of the book or the situation in which the book was used?


More questions found in…

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