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Not beyond our Reach:Collaboration in Special Collection Libraries

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Abstract Based on a three-year collaboration with elementary school instructors, this paper discusses a creative approach to introducing younger students to the historical aspects and unique structure of the medieval book as a physical object. Through incremental activities, students learn to contextualize primary sources in both original and digital surrogates through the use of medieval manuscripts. The methods outlined can be repurposed for use with a variety of subject areas.

Keywords Special Collection Libraries, K-12 Outreach, Collaboration, Primary Sources

1. Introduction

At the 2013 American Library Association (ALA) Conference in Chicago, Illinois, our poster, "Alchemy and Inspiration: Innovative Approaches to K-12 Outreach," was met with a great deal of enthusiasm. Questions and comments from the attendees demonstrated to us that there is a definite interest on the part of librarians to develop outreach programs that introduce young students to the importance of primary sources, but these queries were often preceded by concerns such as, "I just don't know where to start." The reservations and questions from the ALA attendees brought to mind similar issues posited in the current literature—issues that involve hurdles that must be cleared in order for innovative, broader outreach activities to succeed. These fruitful discussions with our colleagues revealed that librarians' interest, despite the challenges, to engage in elementary school outreach reinforced our belief that special collections libraries and archives have a growing, shared responsibility to partner with classroom instructors in an effort to emphasize the continued importance of primary sources and digital surrogates. Rather than being simply a service activity, this form of outreach can become an integral part of the teaching and outreach mission of special collections libraries. Special collections libraries and archives are tremendous resources of historical documents and materials that can enrich the K-12 classroom learning by creating new opportunities to connect with historical artifacts and history in a more personal, relevant way.

Outreach efforts involving younger students can be difficult to coordinate and sometimes creating a program for this population creates a dichotomy—on one hand there is an enthusiasm to reach new users while on the other there is a reluctance on the part of special collections library staff and administrators, a hesitation based on valid concerns, such as staff time-constraints, increased programing demands, and the obligation to preserve/protect materials–all of this as we grapple with limited budgets. Even those special collections and archives that do incorporate this kind of K-12 outreach into their special collections libraries' and archives' outreach mission often find they must justify their outreach services to other members of their community who may be doubtful of such a program's impact. You might ask what some of the benefits are to the participating special libraries and/or archives, but there are many—some immediate and some more long-term. The institution benefits through positive public relations that not only highlight the collections but can showcase previously less well known materials. Some donors appreciate knowing that their collections can be used to a maximum effect not just by dedicated scholars but also by encouraging a new generation of patrons as well. Outreach promotes the role of special collections libraries and repositories in the communication and preservation of cultural heritage (Dekydtspotter & Williams, 2013). Drawing from our work with third through eighth grade teachers in Bloomington, Indiana, this paper will share a program that we have developed over the past three years using medieval manuscripts and digital surrogates; it will also illustrate how our experience can be applied to other materials and historical periods.

2. Methods and Approaches

Our approach to introducing younger students to primary sources attempts to strike a balance between preservation requirements and access to the collections. We make use of instructional scaffolding in order to assure an effective and positive learning experience for students. Instructional

scaffolding breaks up the learning into components and then provides activities as each is built upon. Through a multiple-step approach we introduce special collections materials into the school curriculum in a meaningful way, particularly building a foundation that selects age-appropriate materials (i.e., subject-related books, activity sheets) that at the same time address state-specific common core standards. It is our experience that courses are "enriched through assignments, experiences and activities that draw upon or incorporate local or unusual items, primary sources or material culture---particularly the book as art object or artifact" (Dyson, 1991).

The overarching program's goal is to emphasize the importance of the artifactual object and to encourage and facilitate critical thinking skills. The first step is to establish a collaborative relationship with teachers before the students visit the library to provide pre-learning activities and resources (i.e., age-appropriate reading, a vocabulary list) that reflect specific common core requirements in such areas as language arts, history, and fine arts. These pre-meetings with instructors whether in person, on e-mail, or on the phone, are vital and reinforce that this is a collaborative effort. Teachers share what pre-learning materials they will need and how in-depth they would like for project to be.

As part of an expanded approach (if the teacher so desires it), we visit the classroom several weeks before the actual library fieldtrip. This allows us to reinforce the students' prior knowledge in a familiar space and give them the opportunity to share with us what they have already learned from the foundational pre-learning activities that the teacher has covered with them in class. We work hard to engage in a dialogue with students, often beginning with a discussion of medieval librarians and scribal practice. An additional scaffolding component is an interactive performance of a subject-related book. One we have used with great success is *Marguerite Makes a Book* (Figure 1).

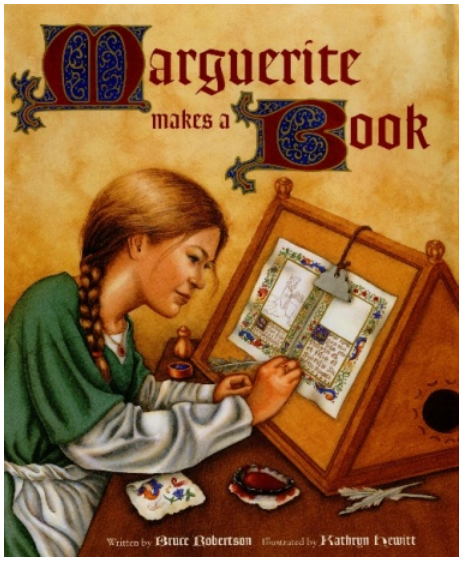

Figure 1. Bruce Robertson and Kathryn Hewitt. Marguerite Makes a Book (Getty Trust Publications: J. Paul Getty Museum, 1999)

The text is memorized and retold to the students with props (i.e., enlarged laminated images from the book) during the visit to their classroom. This fictional story with its female heroine is an excellent introduction to how a medieval illumination was made, describing through colorful illustrations the various steps, tools, and supplies involved. The book follows the adventures of Marguerite whose father is a famous illuminator in medieval Paris. When he falls ill, Marguerite must gather the tools and supplies needed to complete an already commissioned work. We have recently included storytelling into our program as it contributes in important ways to literacy development. "Storytelling as an art form also employs literary conventions, such as point of view, plot, style, characterization, setting and theme" (Mallan, 1991, p. 15). When storytelling is combined with interactive questioning and retelling strategies, comprehension skills can be enhanced (Mallan, 1991). "Vygotsky emphasized that children draw from their entire 'symbolic repertoire' in order to interpret the symbols of text" (Dyson, 1991, p. 102). If symbol systems are "people's way of organizing and responding to experience" (Dyson, 1991, p. 107), then interactive storytelling, whether initiated by a teacher or the students themselves, certainly presents opportunities for this. Stories can act as a reference point, as children decipher how a medieval book was constructed.

After listening to the story of Marguerite, students get a chance to create their own manuscript. In cooperation with a local Bloomington, Indiana, artist, we have developed an illustrated template (Figure 2) where students can create their own story complete with illuminated initial. Scaffolding activities such as these have proved successful in helping students acquire the requisite knowledge to place medieval primary source materials into an historical context while preparing them to get the most from an onsite visit or an in-class viewing of digital surrogates.

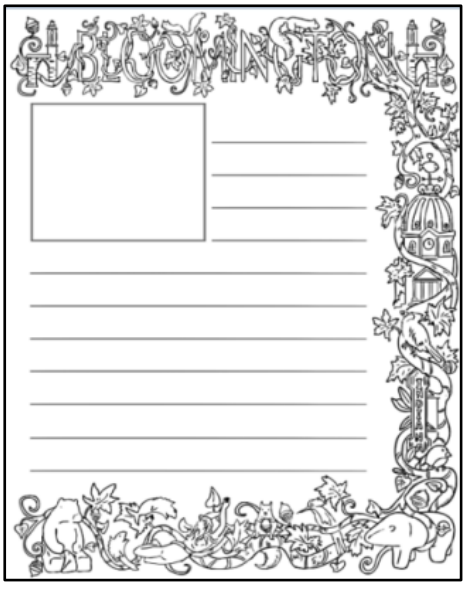

Figure 2. Illustration by Avi Katz

If the culminating activity is a visit to the library, we also use this classroom time to discuss with students what they will see at a special collections library. Students are allowed to handle, smell and pass around a large prepared piece of vellum and we encourage them to share what they remember from their readings about how vellum is made. It is important to prepare students for the visit so that it is a positive experience where the activities are both familiar (i.e., reinforcing their pre-learning) and interesting; it also helps to prepare the students for some behavioral expectations for a museum/library visit. It is our experience that pre-learning activities and question and answer sessions help to diminish some of the traditional barriers to using primary source materials particularly with this age group (Dekydtspotter & Williams, 2013). Following the presentation/discussion, students complete hands-on activities, such as creating their own illuminated initial or practice writing with a quill pen. Other activities can include having students write their own stories about what it would be like working in a medieval scriptorium. These interactive learning activities help students to appreciate, comprehend, and retain historical information. It also uses the common vocabulary (drawn from the vocabulary lists we provide) and utilizes the shared knowledge with which to talk about the materials during the library visit.

Student, parent and teacher feedback to our approach has been consistently positive. One such response documents this positive opinion:

> *I am a third grade classroom teacher and I had the distinct pleasure of participating with my third graders in an elementary Lilly Library outreach program ... This outreach program was designed with the goal of introducing my third grade students to the history of the written word, as well as the historical context and creative process involved in the production of medieval manuscripts. This was an exciting learning opportunity which included [the librarians] visiting our classroom and presenting both an informational and a hands on lesson in the art of writing and illumination during the medieval period. Following the class lesson, we visited the Lilly Library for a class fieldtrip. During this trip, the third graders and I were able to view and discuss medieval manuscripts of various sizes and shapes. We were also able to actually touch some of these books from the [11th to 15th century], which provided a unique learning experience never before afforded any of my third grade students (Madonna Paskash, letter, 2012).*

2.1. Flexibility

Something our 2013 ALA poster touched upon is our desire to expand our outreach work to incorporate other primary and digital surrogate genres and subject matters that prove interesting to young children. Steps for identifying a grouping of manuscript materials or other primary sources could include:

- Surveying your collections to help highlight instructional areas/subjects that could be of use with younger students (i.e., Civil War materials, international children's folktales, local author papers, local history materials, pop-up books, artists' books).
- Topics should fit curricular needs, but selected materials must engage students in the subject matter and create excitement.

When working with larger groups of students, perhaps three to four classes at a time, your approach will have to be adapted to make the proper accommodations. This is where flexibility and creative collaboration come into play—coordinating with other museums and libraries on campus can be helpful in dividing the groups into manageable units. Visiting each classroom prior to the library visit may be impossible, so pre-learning activities could be done through reading materials and activity sheets given to the teacher. Prior to the library visit teachers may be asked to divide their classes into smaller groups. For example, when the students arrive at the Lilly Library, one group is greeted in one of our seminar rooms with the manuscripts displayed. They spend time viewing the physical materials with many opportunities for questions and discussion. The second group views another part of our collection, often our Jerry Slocum Puzzle Collection, and then after approximately 30 minutes, the groups change places (Dekydtspotter & Williams, 2014).

3. Next Step: Outreach at a Distance

Another project we are concurrently working on centers on distance outreach. Partnering with a fifth grade teacher located on the Southside of Chicago has been an enriching experience for all. It is difficult or nearly impossible to bus her classes to local museums. To provide digital surrogate images of medieval manuscripts from the Lilly Library collections, we made use of The Digital Scriptorium (hosted at the Bancroft Library, http: //bancroft.berkeley.edu/digitalscriptorium/).

The Digital Scriptorium is a growing image database of medieval and Renaissance manuscripts which unites scattered resources from many institutions, including the Lilly Library, into an international tool for teaching and scholarly research. We also sent a variety of scriptorium supplies for the students to examine (i.e., feathers, shell gold, pigments, vellum). The feedback from our fifth grade instructor in Chicago is positive and encouraging. We are also working with colleagues from Pennsylvania and California who are attempting to work with local schools to institute similar programs.

The Chicago teacher we have worked with has written that her distant outreach classroom experience has been extremely positive:

> *As an educator, I am well aware of the efficacy of primary sources as learning tools. However, as a teacher in a school where 100 percent of the students*

live in households that are at or below the poverty level, I am very much aware of the devastating effects that razor-thin budgets, severely limited funds and lack of personal funds have on disadvantaged studies ability to participate in field excursions that would afford them opportunities to gain exposure to primary sources … The project brings the world-class resources of the Lilly Library's medieval manuscripts through the Digital Scriptorium database; it also brings the expertise of librarians into the classroom presenting information directly to students and interacting with them through the use of Skype and the best practices recommended by leading researchers and other expertise in the field of edition (Michelle McFarland-McDaniels, letter, 2012).

3.1. So What Can You Do?

- Evaluate your institutions' time commitment and possible sources for funding
- Discuss how many students you can work with at one time (i.e., one class at a time?).
- Do not go it alone--collaborate with local public libraries, professional contacts, colleagues, local/national organizations and friends for help.
- Contact teachers in local schools and advertise the services your library can offer and include ways your collections can support the curriculum.
- Work with the school media specialist or school librarian.
- Preplanning is key—what obstacles are you likely to face and how can they be overcome? An excellent resource written from the perspective of practitioners is Academic library outreach: Beyond the campus walls (see the Additional Resources selection).
- Don't try to do everything at once—even a small outreach effort can make a big difference.
- The unique, incredible artistry and creativity demonstrated by manuscript documents and/or primary source books, when presented with pre-learning and preparation, rarely fails to delight the imagination and engage a sense of wonder in young students (see Figure 3).

The Lilly Library's notable commitment of providing access to its collections to the dedicated scholarly research community as well as to the interested general public bodes well for the future of rare books and manuscripts as physical objects in an ever evolving digital environment. A recently published collection of essays on undergraduate outreach and special collections, Past or Portal? Enhancing Undergraduate Learning Through Special Collections and Archives, illustrates the increased interest in expanding the special collections library to include a new generation of patrons beyond traditional users. Incorporating primary sources across the curriculum enriches students' educational experience by exposing them to rare and/or unique items that inform and entertain. Without a doubt courses across the school curriculum are enriched through assignments, experiences and activities that draw upon or incorporate unique items, primary sources or material culture---particularly the book as art object or artifact (Mitchell, Seiden, & Taraba, 2012).

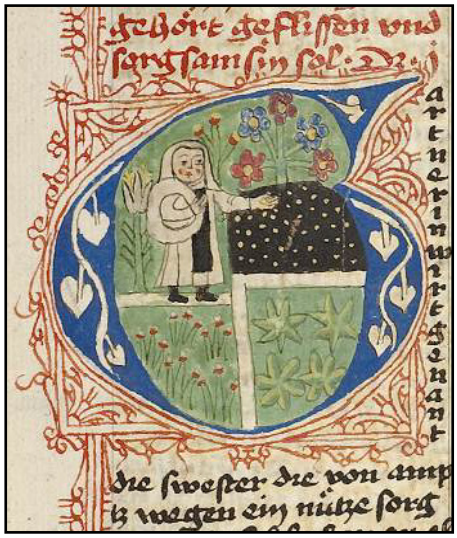

Figure 3. Indiana University, Bloomington, Lilly Library at Indiana University, Ricketts 198. f. 112r Gartnerin, the garden mistress sowing beds of flowers and herbs.

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