

**In Defense of the Dog-and-Pony Show:  
Rethinking One-Shot Instruction in Special Collections Libraries**

*John Miles, Louisiana State University*



**Abstract**

As special collections librarians have become increasingly focused on instruction and active learning there has been a move toward more elaborately designed assignments spread over multiple visits to the special collections library. While such activities are undoubtedly rewarding as library experiences, they may not meet the needs of the professors teaching the classes, for whom teaching time is often at a premium. The one-shot session allows the professor more flexibility within the semester, and this calls for librarians to think about how active learning techniques can be implemented in a single session. This article offers some practical solutions to how the librarian can plan one-time visits to the special collections library that center student learning, while still making the most of the semester's instruction time. Ultimately, librarians would do well to make a virtue out of the necessity of such single-visit instruction sessions, as their flexibility for professors means that they will be a central part of special collections' instruction for the foreseeable future.

*Keywords:* special collections, academic libraries, teaching with primary sources, active learning, one-shot instruction, archives, pedagogy.

## **Introduction: Provocations**

I want to begin with an assertion, possibly even a provocation: the single-visit special collections library instruction session, whether called a one-shot, a one-off, or the more dismissive dog-and-pony show, is a useful and desirable educational experience, one that can be as active and transformative to students as more intensive, long-term instructor-librarian partnerships. Responding as it does to the practicalities of instructors concerned about their classes' learning needs, as well as the shifting pedagogical landscape of the college classroom, the single-visit instructional session deserves re-centering within the outreach programs of special collections libraries, as long as that reevaluation learns from the more immersive classroom work usually discussed in the Teaching with Primary Sources Collective (hereafter TPS) and other similarly minded groups.<sup>1</sup>

Put another way: The dog-and-pony show is dead. Long live the dog-and-pony show!<sup>2</sup>

First, some context. One impetus behind the TPS Collective is to move library instruction beyond one-shot, single-visit classes and toward more active, prolonged, and integrated library experiences for students and instructors. Regarding teaching in special collections, this takes the form of a conscious development of definitions and critical skills around the study of primary sources, be those rare books, manuscripts, born-digital items, or digital surrogates. The goal is

---

<sup>1</sup> I understand the TPS Collective to be both a specific site (<https://tpscollective.org/>) as well as a host of practices and people who assemble around the site, its associated listserv, its 'community calls' (<https://tpscollective.org/category/events-and-opportunities/community-calls/>), as well as its 'unconferences' (<https://tpscollective.org/category/events-and-opportunities/unconferences/>), and sessions at RBMS (usually through the Instruction and Outreach Committee: <https://rbms.info/committees/instruction-outreach/>). Because the group itself is intentionally diffuse, my references to it are similarly more colloquial than specific, except where indicated otherwise. For more information see the TPS Collective homepage: <https://tpscollective.org/what-is-the-tps-collective/>.

<sup>2</sup> Credit to Mark Dimunation, former chief of the rare book and special collections division of the Library of Congress, for popularizing this phrase, one that he uses not dismissively, but rather with some fondness. See for instance his amusing 2006 article for *RBM* "Red wine and white carpets: What we didn't learn in library school, or when the dog and pony goes bad."

straightforward, if not always simple: to give students more tools with which to interact with the archives on their own, to better integrate librarian-led learning sessions into the arc of a course's semester, and to increase the access that students have to their institutions' archival collections.

This move is consonant with larger conversations about how library instruction can be better integrated into the college classroom at a time when the physical library can seem increasingly alien to students. One such strategy is for liaison librarians (or others) to 'embed' within a class and serve as a resource and interlocutor for students and instructors alike over the course of the semester. Similarly, the TPS Collective has curated a wealth of materials as a part of the "Guidelines Toolkit" to help librarians and their teaching faculty peers prepare classroom activities for active learning with an emphasis on primary source literacy.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, this move toward student-led learning and a de-centering of the instructor is part of a larger, decades-long trend to rethink how learning happens in the college classroom, a project begun in part by feminist reevaluations of the college classroom, and leading at different times to large-scale innovations such as the 'flipped' classroom and Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs).<sup>4</sup> Summarized briefly, this move toward active, immersive teaching in special collections' libraries responds to larger trends within the field of higher education, to create a more inclusive, active, and critical learning experience for undergraduate and graduate students.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> The Teaching with Primary Sources Collective dates its 'unconferences' to 2014; the wealth of its bibliographic resources begin in earnest in the first decade of the 2000s. See also the American Library Association's "Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy" (<https://www.ala.org/acrl/sites/ala.org/acrl/files/content/standards/Primary%20Source%20Literacy2018.pdf>).

<sup>4</sup> Not all such experiments are successful or to be imitated. MOOCs in particular, after blazing brightly in the second decade of the twenty-first century, have largely failed to deliver upon their promises. Cathy Davidson, an early and vocal proponent of MOOCs, has tempered her enthusiasm for such courses. See her 2017 book *The new education*. See also Davidson's most recent book with Christina Katopodis (fall 2022) *The new college classroom*. For a look at MOOCs in their glory, see the article about Davidson in *The chronicle of higher education* (2012), "MOOC mania: It's raising big questions about the future of higher education"; or the website where Davidson collected her teaching on the subject: "MOOC interventions: The history and future of (mostly higher) education."

<sup>5</sup> Worth noting is ALA's publication *The one-shot library instruction survival guide* (2021), now in its third edition. My work here is a supplement to, not a revision of that, with a specific focus on work in special collections libraries.

What follows is not a retrenchment of some outdated version of the sage-on-the-stage model hastily retrofitted for library instruction, nor an attack upon either the spirit or the realities of the innovations launched in part by the TPS Collective and its peers. Far from it. Instead, I want to revisit how we think about single-visit instruction in special collections, with an eye toward better understanding its role within a course's sweep, as well as rethinking how such visits might benefit from the insights gathered and employed by recent pedagogic innovations. I argue that revisiting how a library instruction session is situated within a class's semester work can help librarians to better understand when and why a one-off visit is appropriate, as well as how to work with an instructor to better plan a single visit that forwards the course's pedagogical goals. Finally, I suggest a few practical ways that the doggiest of pony shows can incorporate TPS-inspired insights for more successful class visits, more dynamic library interactions for the students, as well as better long-term relationships with teaching faculty. Ultimately, as single-visit library sessions will always be a part of any library instruction program, I hope that reconsidering such classes in the context of active learning principles can lead to more vibrant and transformative instruction sections, even if they are fleeting, if only in the mind of the librarian.

### **Table-setting: Library Visits from the Outside**

The bulk of my argument here is not theoretical or ideological but practical, born out of the recognition of the often-difficult place that library teaching sessions find themselves within the larger sweep of a college semester, specifically the place that the class's professor finds such visits within his or her conceptualization of the course's schedule. Consider for a moment the pacing of the semester as seen through an instructor-of-record's eyes as they plan their syllabus. Take for instance a rather common semester planned around a standard fifteen-week semester for

a class that meets twice a week for thirty total classes. Remove from consideration the first and last day of classes, given over as they often are to general housekeeping issues, and twenty-eight meetings remain. Figure in another three classes devoted either to exams or to paper-writing activities (workshopping, brainstorming, drafting, etc.), and you arrive at the rough estimate of twenty-five content-heavy classes. For this example, each ‘working’ class meeting is thus four percent of the semester, and two such classes – a week – represent a full eight percent of the classes ‘free’ to professors. For those classes tasked with covering enormous swaths of material – survey classes that cover hundreds of years of literature, focus on large geographic regions, or cover many different subfields – the thought of ‘losing’ or ‘giving away’ such a large chunk of valuable time can be daunting, as the need to fully cover a topic implicitly or explicitly drives many instructors as they plan their semester.

Above and beyond a semester’s content, professors must consider the work – and the *graded* work, importantly – upon which they will evaluate their students. To rationalize a semester’s labor – and thus a student’s grade – an instructor must have a clear rationale for each assignment, with clearly defined goals whose evaluation of which will be consistent across other assignments. This can be difficult if that assignment has been designed, at least in part in conjunction with librarians who (generally) won’t be grading such projects. The work might take the form of traditional essays, tests, group projects, discussion posts, or a myriad of other activities, but each of these is entirely under the purview of the instructor, and because he or she designs and implements such assignments, the criteria for evaluation are (relatively) tightly controlled. Students’ grades are never far from their sight, and anything that doesn’t have a clear and direct link to that grade is often deemed as either irrelevant or ‘fluff’ unworthy of a student’s time. This can be doubly true when an outside-the-classroom experience such as a visit to special

collections involves a written assignment that the students perceive (rightly or wrongly) either isn't the work of – or isn't valued by – the instructor-of-record.

One hypothetical might be illustrative here. Take for instance a survey of early American literature that is often taught in English departments, one that begins in the colonial – or, increasingly, the pre-colonial – period, and usually ends at or around the Civil War.<sup>6</sup> Applying the numbers from above (fifteen-week class, minus five meetings), roughly thirty years must be covered each week (1500ish to 1865, spread over twelve-and-a-half weeks). If this doesn't seem daunting, consider both that this period is not generally covered evenly, and that it must account for material produced over a wide region. Within that period a class might devote two weeks to a novel – Charles Brockden Brown's gothic novel *Wieland* (1798) for instance – and another two on Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the life of an American slave...* (1845). Suddenly, a month of class is spoken for, and the remainder of the course periods are now left to divide the same 350-year period – the two large books represent only two discrete points – over the remaining seventeen class meetings, and now a week is covering roughly forty years. Forty years a week, or roughly a generation a week, is almost twice the amount of time covered by, say, the Transcendentalist movement (defined as between the founding of the Transcendental Club in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1836 to Henry David Thoreau's death in 1862), or if measured against the early Republican period, ten presidential terms per week. Want to spend a day in special collections? That will cost you the period from Jefferson to Van Buren. Two such visits? Goodbye sixteenth century.

---

<sup>6</sup> This example admittedly isn't chosen completely at random. Before beginning my current position in LSU's Special Collections I spent a decade teaching early American literature at the graduate and undergraduate level and the undergraduate survey was my favorite class to teach. Because of the size of most nineteenth-century novels – see for instance *Moby-Dick*, or *Uncle Tom's cabin* – pacing the second half of the semester was always particularly difficult. While most other classes don't have a literal white whale in their way, most have one or more challenging scheduling problems, and I hope that this example can be extrapolated to other disciplines and subjects.

These time constraints are not unique to special collections libraries, though the fact that visits to such archives are (usually) in-person is potentially more disruptive than a visit from a subject librarian. Instead, this is simply to illustrate how semesters are often so tightly scheduled that devoting a whole class period to library instruction can feel like dereliction on the instructor-of-record's part, even when from the librarian's side it might feel like table scraps. Add in that trips to special collections libraries often involve different physical spaces, unusual buildings, and new rules, and the attractiveness of a visit to special collections can often begin to wane in a professor's mind before the event finds its way onto a course syllabus. Even for the most archivally dedicated professors, these practical scheduling concerns are real and pressing reasons to stay within their own classrooms and focus instead on tightly knitting a semester's narrative over which they have greater (if never total) control.

The point here is not that professors' time is short (as is everyone's), but that their goals for their courses are different from those of their librarian collaborators, and sometimes at odds with them. While the librarian wants to design the most valuable, dynamic, and even original primary source experience for the class, one he or she feels is best served by multiple visits and a multi-part archival project, the instructor-of-record has other goals, some linked to the subject matter (coverage, exposure, etc.) and with student success (never reduced to, but epitomized by, grades).<sup>7</sup> A deep dive into the serialization of short stories in the nineteenth-century United States might be well-supported by a library's collections, and suggest an excellent digital humanities mapping project, but if such work prevents an instructor from teaching, say, abolition, Sojourner Truth, Emily Dickinson, or the Federalist Papers, such an activity might

---

<sup>7</sup> There are examples where librarians and instructors share in grading, or where librarians receive some sort of formal or informal evaluation by the students, but these only go to the larger point: such things take time, and time with few immediate benefits for instructors and their careers.

simply be too much for a single class to attempt, no matter how great it would be as a stand-alone assignment.

This might all be worked out through a conversation – or likely a series of conversations – between the instructor and the librarian about just what should go into an instruction session, as well as what the students should get out of it. Such discussions help form a relationship between the librarian and the instructor, allowing each to understand the potential for collaborative work as well as to develop trust in one another, a trust which the faculty member must have when ‘turning over’ his or her class to someone who is not immediately beholden to students in terms of course grades, and untouched by course evaluations. And building this trust takes time; not time away from the class, but away from other pursuits, most notably research.<sup>8</sup>

Time ultimately is the great leveler, that thing that refuses to recede from instructors as they plan their classes, shoehorning in assignments and leaving favorite books off the syllabus, and which seems an all-too-precious commodity as they figure out how to teach, research, write, do service work, and (maybe) do a few non-academic things on the side. There are plenty of factors on the other side, reasons to push for longer archival activities and multiple visits, and these are both pedagogically sound and practically reasonable, especially when viewed from a librarian’s perspective. However, these real benefits might cut against or be irrelevant to a professor’s semester goals, and thus an impediment to developing a good relationship between the librarian and the professor.

### **Reevaluation: Maybe Not So Bad After All?**

---

<sup>8</sup> For a detailed example of how close collaboration can result in a productive revision of a library activity, see Watson et al. (2013), “Revising the ‘one-shot’ through lesson study: Collaborating with writing faculty to rebuild a library instruction session.” Samuelson and Coker’s 2014 article “Mind the gap: Integrating special collections teaching” is a good discussion of how to frame productive collaborations between faculty and a teaching program in a special collections library.



Considered against such mundane but real-time constraints, the one-shot instruction session, with its lower bar of preparation on the part of the instructor and fewer demands on the arc of the semester, begins to seem like a more attractive option, or at least a more practical one.<sup>9</sup> And the one-shot is not without its real joys, ones that might not be either as active or as innovative as we as librarians might want, but that better comport with a professor's needs and a course's goals. After all, it is much easier for an instructor to find a single day to visit the archives than it is to invest the time required to schedule, plan, execute, and grade a multi-visit, product-driven lesson. While ultimately the latter leads to a better archival experience and conveys more primary source literacy, this doesn't mean that it is necessarily a better option than a single session. In fact, the single-visit class in special collections has some real positives that might be hard to recognize at times, especially by librarians for whom the wonder of the archives is so regular as to be routine. However workaday such experiences might be to the jaded archivist, when viewed through the eyes of the professor – and from the vantage point of the sterile, generic classroom in which most students find themselves – these visits take on added importance and hint at the one-shot's greatest potential impact.<sup>10</sup>

For most college students, the wood-paneled classrooms and oak seminar tables of Hollywood's conception of college life are a far cry from their standard learning experience,

---

<sup>9</sup> Of immediate relevance here is the September 2022 issue of *College & Research Libraries* dedicated to one-shot library instruction edited by Nicole Pagowsky, itself a multi-part response to Pagowsky's 2021 article in *C&RL* titled "The contested one-shot: Deconstructing power structures to imagine new futures." The special issue's abstract states that its impetus "was an overwhelming indication of catharsis in reading about and potentially contributing to a special issue that would dig into this oft-criticized instruction model. There were additionally a handful of defensive reactions to support the one-shot." Because this issue's release was concurrent with the final revisions of this article, I don't engage directly with it here. Suffice it to say that I envision my response not as defensive (despite the wink of the title), but rather a reevaluation. In addition, my work is specific to special collections libraries, for whom the one-shot, dog-and-pony-show has a slightly different valence than "The contested one-shot."

<sup>10</sup> While different in its goals, Vong's 2016 article "A constructivist approach for introducing undergraduate students to special collections and archival research," articulates some of these concerns in its theoretical framing.

which are more likely finished in Formica, pressed wood, and linoleum. The leather-bound hardback is unlikely to make an appearance, substituted increasingly by .pdfs read on mobile devices. The democratization of higher education comes at the cost of more well-to-do trappings, meaning that students' approach to the past is more likely to be mediated by screens than rag paper, and that the words and ideas of past generations are brought into the present by modern means and in contemporary trappings. These innovations reduce cost and increase access, but they can also hollow out part of the theater of the academy. This can have a real effect on learning, however secondary (or tertiary) these superficial externalities might seem to the speeches of Cicero, the poetry of Sappho, or 19<sup>th</sup>-century utopian movements.

A well-designed one-shot visit to special collections can work to deepen the sense of time for students who otherwise access historical texts through digital mediums and help students shift their focus from the immediate concerns of grades and assignments to the greater academic enterprise, one which transcends their present moment. Professors and students alike often struggle to shift their focus beyond the walls of the classroom and the immediate rhythms of the semester with its schedule of assignments and slate of activities, tending to focus attention on the practicalities of the class as opposed to the broader implications of the ideas with which the class wrestles and their application and existence outside of the textbook. One of the benefits of a visit to special collections is that it helps students to understand how their work is part of a longer and wider scholarly tradition, and that while their immediate interlocutor might be their professor, who after all assigns them their grade, they are working within a larger context, one that includes students across the university and the nation, as well as through time. Part of this shift in perception might be effected by something as simple as the physical change in location, as well as the expansion of the class's conversation to include not simply the students and the instructor,

but librarians as well. And the materials encountered in that visit point to the larger conversations in which the class is participating, discussions that live inside and around the objects on display.

### **Learning from Peers: Active Learning in a Single Visit**

If single-visit library sessions are going to be successful we must learn from the work done by the TPS Collective and others about how to incorporate active learning into library visits.<sup>11</sup> This is both because students now expect greater engagement in their classrooms, and because it simply makes for a better class, something that has always been true, whatever labels are applied to various pedagogical approaches. An hour-long class needn't be a lecture in the traditional sense, and while it might never be either as dynamic or interactive as a hands-on primary source boot camp or some similarly plotted library activity, it still can be structured to capitalize on active-learning techniques even in a one-shot setting.

### **Welcoming**

One of the unfortunate aspects of the one-shot class is that every session is the first day of the semester for the librarian. Each class represents a new group of students, meaning that the beginning-of-the-semester nerves that usually hit professors only once a term can befuddle the library instructor almost daily. This, combined with the (almost) always-present imposter syndrome can make the first few minutes of class jittery.<sup>12</sup> Using the few unstructured minutes

---

<sup>11</sup> In addition to those listed above, see also the recent article by R. Dreyer (2022), "Refworld: Future frontiers for special collections libraries"; Peter Carini's 2016 article "Information literacy for archives and special collections" situates teaching with the larger context of primary source literacy; both Smith (2006), "From 'treasure room' to 'school room': Special collections and education," and Magia Krause (2021), "'It makes history alive for them': The role of archivists and special collections librarians in instructing undergraduates," are good glimpses back at the beginning of this move toward more active teaching in special collections.

<sup>12</sup> "Imposter syndrome" is relatively new as a formal topic of research, even if the condition that it describes is long standing. L. Rakestraw (2019) addresses practical approaches to overcoming this in Rakestraw, L. (2017), "How to stop feeling like a phony in your library: Recognizing the causes of the imposter syndrome, and how to put a stop to the cycle." S. Lacey and M. Parlette-Stewart (2017) are equally praxis-oriented in "Jumping into the deep: Imposter syndrome, defining success, and the new librarian." Blume (2022) focuses specifically on imposter syndrome with regards to library instruction, albeit not in a special collections library, in "Learning instructional methods and practices: An early career health sciences librarian perspective."

before class and the opening minutes of class to welcome the students, and doing so actively and even individually, can go to great lengths in calming both the librarian's 'first-day' nerves, as well as allay any fears or hesitations that the class might have. Using the opening of the class to extend hospitality and courtesy to your guests reconfigures, however subtly, the amorphous student-librarian relationship, instead implying one where you assert your right to welcome, and thus your ownership of the space, while simultaneously recognizing that you have certain responsibilities to your guests (the students). These responsibilities extend from you as host to them as individual guests, thereby substituting an instructor-class model with a more egalitarian guest-host relationship.

Beyond simply giving yourself a butterfly-dispelling activity to begin the class session, this act of consciously greeting students helps them feel welcomed as individuals and not merely as members of the larger class. It is unlikely if not impossible that you will remember all the students' names, and post-COVID it is certainly not necessary to shake each student's hand. However, setting the tone as a gracious host from the beginning, obligated to his or her guests, allows the librarian to ask for certain other obligations from them. Reframed in this way, the rules of special collections – no food or drink, pencils, clean hands, no bags, etc. – are reframed not as a set of injunctions, but instead as the duties of a guest. The parameters are the same of course, but the shift from the negative – what *not* to do – to the contractual – what we do together – is a small way to move the impetus for such obedience to one that is positive and affirmative instead of negative and passive. Hailing students as individuals recognizes them as active interlocutors and not passive vessels receiving knowledge.

### **Opening Gambit/Gimmicks**

You've told students who you are and you have a small sense of who they are as a class,

but you're still faced with the problem of introducing the often-intimidating nature of a special collections library to students for whom working familiarity with any library might be foreign. You want to illustrate the kinds of materials that your library holds and simultaneously ensure that the students begin to feel as if they have the right to use the materials. To do so it is often good to have a few set-pieces to serve as an opening gambit in your welcoming speech (gimmicks if you will) to set the tone for active engagement between the students and their library's materials. These moments aren't necessarily designed to further a particularly advanced pedagogical agenda, nor are they always immediately relevant to the course subject matter. Instead, they are designed to upend the students' expectations and signal that the session before them might hold further surprises.

The framing of such moments can be very simple: "I realize many/most of you might not have been in a special collections library before, so I wanted to begin with something that helps me understand..." Here, you acknowledge the students' inexperience, but then draw similarities between you and them as you approach an unfamiliar object. The object in question might be anything, but the best examples are ones that look like something familiar, but which upon closer – if quick – inspection reveal themselves to be something else. Examples might include a book that has been hollowed out to serve as a book safe, an easily legible manuscript letter that discusses an event that parallels a current news item, a book with an inscription from someone famous, a book whose binding has broken to reveal legible binding waste, a photograph of someone famous next to recognizable campus landmark, or even something as simple as a historic copy of the campus or local newspaper that speaks in some way to some current event. The best examples put the objects in question in the students' hands, so they can turn to page twenty-two and find an ad for the premiere of *Star Wars*, or the page where the book reveals

itself to be a book-safe. It can be a collective experience as well. If the first student to look at the newspaper waste in a book's broken binding can't read it, have them pass it to their neighbor; if a letter is hard to read, have it blown up on a slide so that the class can look at it together. Whatever the subject matter of the class, the tone has been set: we're here to look anew at familiar objects, for there are surprises to be found.

Another even more basic gimmick is the "what-is-the-oldest-thing-you've-touched?" game, whereby you offer students a chance to physically touch a medieval manuscript page, an old book, a cuneiform tablet, or some other such (to them) 'ancient' object.<sup>13</sup> This isn't the most complicated manner of engaging students, but it does do two quick things in just a few moments: it collapses their sense of time, whereby a past that has always been abstract to them is made concrete, and it forces them to consider what their relationship to that past has been heretofore. This moment of 'touching the past' shouldn't be discounted, however workaday such an experience might seem to a special collections librarian. A book from the Victorian era might seem rather mundane to us, but to students for whom a decade-old iPhone is hopelessly out of date, this recognition of how the past continues into the present can be revelatory. Moreover, it prepares you to make a larger point later in class about how not only do the objects of the past endure in the present, so do some of the ideas of the past – for better or ill.

These gimmicks are small moments designed less to make a point about course content – though they may do that as well – and more to set the tone for the students' involvement in the course session. On one hand, they demonstrate to students how we want them to engage with the

---

<sup>13</sup> This is an excellent time to use examples from a 'Pages from the past' collection or an Otto Ege manuscript page that might not otherwise see much use. These collections of fragments and other such 'wonders' often have a troubling, if largely invisible, history, but using them in such a way reinvigorates them with pedagogical value that they might not otherwise have, perhaps in some way justifying their use and going a small way to make amends for an object's past that we might not find altogether savory.

materials, but perhaps more importantly these set-pieces force students to interact with us and with the materials rather than simply receiving information. You need to have only a few such opening gambits in your repertoire, and in most cases there's no need to spend more than a couple minutes on this activity. Light-hearted for sure but opening gambits can set the stage for an exciting class.

### **Rule of Three and Getting Moving**

Signposting an instruction session – providing clear indications of what the class will cover, with verbal cues dropped throughout the class – allows students to better knit the material that you are covering into a narrative. At its most basic this involves telling students: 1) what you're going to tell them, 2) what you're telling them, and then 3) telling them what you've just told them. Framed in such an (intentionally) repetitive way, these verbal cues help to pace the class and locate the students within the allotted time frame. These transitions don't need to be elaborate or artful, and the more direct they are often makes them more effective: "Today we are going to be working with ... now we want to move to ... what I hope you'll remember from what we covered today." This is simple, and providing students with these clear markers allows them to plot the class chronologically, turning a visit into a narrative that can be recalled more easily later.

Physical movement can also serve as a mnemonic for the class. Depending on the physical constraints of your library's teaching space, you may need to move a little or a lot to see the class's materials, but whatever the case, doing so intentionally and with clear signposting will aid in students' retention of the material. The issue of when and how much to move students around a classroom is one of pacing, something that you might also consider even if the students never leave their chairs. Breaking up moments of static looking or listening, shifts that might or

might not be physical, keeps students focused and on task. Most classes will likely begin seated to allow for introductions, framing, best practices instruction, and the like. Ending a class similarly seated and summarizing what the students have seen and learned – telling them what you’ve told them, from above – brings the class full circle to fix in the students’ minds the work that they have done. Punctuating the time between these two bookends with physical transitions, whether the movement is that of the students’ or your own, will help break the time up into discrete pieces, thus increasing students’ attentiveness and (hopefully) participation.<sup>14</sup>

### **Choose Your Own Adventure**

Undoubtedly the special collections instructor’s best tools are the materials at his or her disposal: books, manuscripts, and other items often arrayed over several tables and waiting for the students.<sup>15</sup> These materials might be arranged chronologically, by subject matter, or by form, but it is a logic that comes, either directly or indirectly, from the person who selected them – presumably, though not always, the librarian in charge of the session. Thus, the temptation might be to walk the students (literally or not) through these as they were assembled, as doing so would reveal to the class the logic behind the assemblage and illustrate the narrative they’ve been chosen to represent. Such an approach has the advantage of producing a clear narrative, as well as being certain that you as the instructor don’t miss any important points or leave gaps in the story that you’re trying to tell.

At times, however, varying that narrative can be valuable, and one way to do so is to allow students to choose what materials they’ll see and in what order. There are limits to this, but

---

<sup>14</sup> For a recent look at the negative effects of long-terms sitting upon students’ attention, see Hoesteng (2019), “Uninterrupted classroom sitting is associated with increased discomfort and sleepiness among college students.”

<sup>15</sup> This is ignoring those classes where students are seated and work with only one or two items. Because such setups presume a kind of active engagement with the materials before the student, I am setting them aside for the purposes of this article.



after first setting the stage with opening remarks or a few well-chosen examples, often it is useful to ask students where they want to go next: Should we start with medieval manuscript facsimiles? Or perhaps early colonial American publications? Meeting notes from labor unions from the '20s and '30s, or the newspapers that covered those meetings? Should we look at the signed first edition of Huey Long's autobiography or his political papers? This can be a bit daunting for the librarian, as building in transitions on the fly can be difficult work, and work that is hard to plan – who knew the students would want to see *that* first?!? – but it also gives students the opportunity to make their own connections and build their own narratives.

The stories that students tell themselves about what materials they have seen, how they fit together, and how they relate to their coursework will be their enduring memories of the class. Sure, the Nuremberg Chronicle<sup>16</sup> and its many woodblock illustrations are stunning alone, but help students to set in a narrative about the transition between manuscript and print, or poise it for them at the cusp (1493) of the radical shift in the European world as a result of Columbus's return to the continent? Now students can marvel not only at an object, but also how that object is part of a larger story, a story they have helped produce in the class. The point is to not present whatever material as static (if glorious), but as taking part in a larger conversation, materially represented in the book, manuscript, or other material on display.

There are objections to this, both practical and pedagogical. For instance, if the professor selects all the material, then they are ultimately in charge of the different possible stories to be told, and any appearance of students' choice is a thin allusion. On the other side, sometimes

---

<sup>16</sup> The *Registrum huius operis libri cronicarum cu[m] figuris et ymag[in]ibus ab inicio mu[n]di*, also known as the *Liber chronicarum*, or popularly as the Nuremberg Chronicle, is the most extensively illustrated printed book of the fifteenth century. Published in Nuremberg, Germany in 1493 by Anthonius Koberger, the medieval history includes some 1809 woodcut illustrations pulled from 641-643 individual woodblocks. LSU Libraries was fortunate to purchase a copy at auction in December of 2019 with help from the B.H. Breslauer Foundation.

students need a hard and clear narrative, one possibly that they or their professor disrupt later in the semester, but whose initial seemingly concrete nature allows them to easily digest the items before them. Both criticisms have their place, and as much as we might be tempted to let students simply request books in class while a platoon of librarians ferry them to the library's instruction space for display, this is simply not practical. Similarly, the resources of most special collections libraries are often insufficient to fully illustrate a certain story or concept as discussed in a college course, as such classes are (almost never) designed entirely with the local library's holding's in mind, but instead with an eye for an external body of knowledge or set of guiding questions. Choosing when to assert a strong linear narrative and when to embrace a more haphazard approach comes with practice and can be aided by discussing with the professor which approach he or she believes the students will most benefit from.

### **Easter Eggs<sup>17</sup>**

At some point every instructor is worried that a class will fall flat or lose steam as the period drags on. This might be because of simple nerves, unfamiliarity with the subject matter, or lack of experience teaching. Whatever the case, it's always good to have a few items that you can count on to surprise or delight students. This can be something as simple as an artist's book with a surprising pop-up, or something individually tailored to a class such as the professor's book or dissertation, or an inscribed copy of a book the class is reading. Whatever the case, keeping a few of these things in mind as places to turn if the class starts to drag can make you feel more confident going into the class, and allow you points of disruption once the course is underway. Asking a student to read a book's inscription and then having the class identify the

---

<sup>17</sup> This concept is taken from the videogame industry but has been often applied to other areas. For a brief look at how gamification can impact teaching see Yee (2013) "Pedagogical gamification: Principles of video games that can enhance teaching."

writer, or drawing their attention to a detailed illustration that contains something surprising or unexpected asks students to engage directly with an item, as well as forces someone other than yourself to talk. If a class is engaged and self-directed the students will find these themselves, but if not, drawing their attention to such hidden gems can break the rhythm and reset a visit that has slipped into a lull.

### **Joy; Involving the Professor**

The single most important thing you can do during an instruction section is to model the excitement and possibility of archival research. Sometimes this is easy, such as when the class is in a field in which you work or in which you have a particular stake, but even when the subject is a bit more of a stretch, the archival materials necessary for research offer the librarian a chance to demonstrate to students an excitement for scholarship. For instance, a class on mid-20<sup>th</sup> century fashion might not be the first thing you think about when you awake each morning – you might not yourself have sartorial inclinations – but modeling the excitement of archival research is easy to reproduce. Simply by showing students how to work through a collection’s finding aid and matching it to an archival box’s contents, then displaying the vibrant colors of a *Life* magazine contained therein is an example of an easy way to perform archival joy about something you might otherwise know little about.<sup>18</sup> In moments such as this, you can harness your expertise over the process of the research to augment any subject area shortcomings. Further, if the topic or subject matter is a stretch for your expertise, developing a rapport with the professor and offering them a forum to demonstrate their own excitement can help share some of

---

<sup>18</sup> “Archival joy” is (I believe) my turn of phrase, but it draws inspiration from M. Tamboukou’s (2018) “The joy of learning: Feminist materialist pedagogies and the freedom of education,” as well as more general works such as P. Filene’s older (2005) *The joy of teaching: A practical guide for new college instructors*, which was influential in my time before I joined a library’s faculty.

what can be a significant physical and emotional burden.<sup>19</sup>

Don't be afraid to admit your unfamiliarity with a subject or simple ignorance about a particular work or group of works' significance, but instead suggest that the professor take over the explanation for such materials. Assuming that they are willing and able to do so, your job can move from modeling your own passion, to modeling the excitement of the students: "And now I'm really excited to hear Professor X talk about Y, because I know I had these questions...". At this moment, when students see their (likely older) librarian move from instructor to excited student, what they are observing is not simply the pleasure of learning something new, but the passion of a lifelong learner.

This method can be and often is reciprocal, as the professor likely will have moments when he or she can slide into role of the model student, as the librarian speaks from their own area of expertise, be that the materiality of the items on display; the processes by which the library acquires, catalogs, preserves, or stores materials; library history; or simply primary source literacy as described by someone outside his or her own field. More than simply modeling the curious scholar, such an interplay displays how scholarship is not only the mastery of material, but a dynamic combination of learning and teaching processes that go together. As the librarian and the professor work together, learn together, and teach together, they establish a template for scholarly inquiry that transcends any stand-alone library visit, and instead shows how knowledge creation is a collective, dynamic activity.

### **Conclusion: On Not Throwing Away the One-Shot**

While the one-shot instruction session will never be as dynamic as a multi-visit series,

---

<sup>19</sup> While it is beyond the scope of this essay, the physical work of teaching, especially of emoting excitement, is not to be overlooked or discounted. At times this can come naturally, or seem effortless, but when emoting is work, the physical toll can be significant. When you can anticipate this being the case, try to offload some of this work onto the professor, for if it is their field it will come as second nature to them.

nor as transformative as a larger assignment that has students return to the archive to follow their own research interests, for professors who are considering the practicalities of time, a single visit to the special collections library is often the only option. It thus makes sense for librarians to consider how we can make the most of this small opportunity and give students the best experience we can offer given these constraints. By learning both from the larger ideas of feminist pedagogy, as well as the more targeted suggestions by organizations such as the ALA regarding active learning, we can craft single-visit instruction sessions that revise a staid lecture into something more interactive and thus potentially transformative.<sup>20</sup>

There is another aspect of this reconsideration worth mentioning. While above I highlighted the amount of work a professor must do to incorporate a multi-visit exercise into his or her class, it is worth pointing out how such interactive partnerships can be time-intensive for librarians as well. Identifying and paging materials, building activities around them, guiding students through those activities, and then responding to them in some way is a great deal of work for the librarian, and it is work that is often subject-specific, and thus not easily transferable to other classes or other subjects. On the other hand, modifying how one-shot visits are configured and executed is a systematic change with repercussions for any class visit, as it is less dependent upon content and is more reflective of how the librarian relates to the students. No two classes are the same, but familiarizing yourself with and practicing the rhythms of an active single session will pay dividends in every class, because each librarian can reach a wider audience by offering more sessions that might vary in content but are similar in how they are conceptualized and conducted.

If one argument for the durability of the one-shot instruction session is rooted in the

---

<sup>20</sup> For a recent survey of the use of feminist pedagogical practices in library instruction see Kingsland (2020), “Undercover feminist pedagogy in information literacy: A literature review.”

amount of work that more intensive sessions demand of the course's professor, then it is worth ending here with a point about librarians' labor. Crafting single-visit sessions in a special collections library is labor intensive, and it is labor born by the entirety of the library's staff, not simply the instruction librarian. That such work might be less than that of multi-visit sessions is worth acknowledging, but the real workload reduction comes when the one-shot instruction is considered modularly, so that the different pedagogical techniques can be transported to other classes. While material selection will always be more or less specific to certain classes, developing a suite of active-learning tools to use across classes and with different materials can reduce the workload of the librarian while still providing students and professors with the quality of instruction they want and need. It may never be as transformative for students as a long-term archival research project might be, but in the class time that it preserves for professors, and in the labor that it saves for librarians, the one-shot can be an efficient and effective pedagogical experience, one worthy of continuing to foreground in a special collections library's instruction program.

## References

- Blume, R. (2022). Learning instructional methods and practices: An early career health sciences librarian perspective. *Medical Reference Services Quarterly*, 41(1), 117–125.
- Buchanan, H. E., & McDonough, B. A. (2021). *The one-shot library instruction survival guide* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). ALA Editions.
- Carini, P. (2016). Information literacy for archives and special collections: Defining outcomes. *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 16(1), 191-206. [doi:10.1353/pla.2016.0006](https://doi.org/10.1353/pla.2016.0006).
- Davidson, C. (August 11, 2013). MOOC Interventions: The history and future of (mostly higher) education. Cathy Davidson. <https://www.cathydavidson.com/innovations/mooc-interventions-the-history-and-future-of-mostly-higher-education/>
- Davidson, C. (2017). *The new education: How to revolutionize the university to prepare students for a world in flux*. Basic Books.
- Davidson, C., & Katopodis, C. (2022). *The new college classroom*. Harvard University Press.
- Dimunation, M. (2006). Red wine and white carpets: What we didn't learn in library school, or when the dog and pony goes bad. *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Cultural Heritage*, 7(1), 73-84. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5860/rbm.7.1.260>
- Dreyer, R. (2022). Refworld: Future frontiers for special collections libraries. *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, 110(3), 257–274. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45420510>
- Filene, P. G. (2005). *The joy of teaching: A practical guide for new college instructors*. University of North Carolina University Press.
- Hosteng, K. R., Reichter, A. P. Reichter, Simmering, J. E., & Carr, L. J. (2019). Uninterrupted classroom sitting is associated with increased discomfort and sleepiness among college students. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 16(14),

2498. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph16142498>
- Kingsland, E. (2020). Undercover feminist pedagogy in information literacy: A literature review. *Evidence Based Library and Information Practice*, 15(1), 126–141. <https://doi.org/10.18438/eblip29636>
- Krause, M. G. (2010). “It makes history alive for them”: The role of archivists and special collections librarians in instructing undergraduates. *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 36(5), 401-411. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2010.06.004>
- Lacey, S., & Parlette-Stewart, M. (2017). Jumping into the deep: Imposter syndrome, defining success, and the new librarian. *Partnership: The Canadian Journal of Library & Information Practice & Research*, 12(1), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.21083/partnership.v12i1.3979>
- Managan, K. (2012). MOOC mania: It’s raising big questions about the future of higher education. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 1, 2012. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/mooc-mania/>
- Pagowsky, N. (2021). The contested one-shot: Deconstructing power structures to imagine new futures. *College & Research Libraries*, 82(3), 300. <https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.82.3.300>
- Pagowsky, N. (2022). Introduction to the special issue: Critique as care: Disrupting narratives of the one-shot instruction model. *Special issue of College & Research Libraries*, edited by Nicole Pagowsky, 83(5), 713. <https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.83.5.713>
- Rakestraw, L. (2017). How to Stop Feeling like a Phony in Your Library: Recognizing the Causes of the Imposter Syndrome, and How to Put a Stop to the Cycle. *Law Library Journal*, 109(3), 465–479.
- Samuelson, T., & Coker, C. (2014). Mind the gap: Integrating special collections teaching.



- portal: *Libraries and the Academy* 14(1), 51-66. [doi:10.1353/pla.2013.0041](https://doi.org/10.1353/pla.2013.0041).
- Schedel, H. (1493). *Registrum huius operis libri cronicarum cu[m] figuris et ymag[in]ibus ab inicio mu[n]di Ad intuitu[m] ... [et] preces ... Sebaldi Schreyer [et] Sebastiani Kamermaister hunc librum dominus Anthonius Koberger Nuremberge impressit, Consummatu[m] ... duodecima mensis Iulij anno salutis n[ost]re.*
- Smith, S. (2006). From “treasure room” to “school room”: Special collections and education. *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Cultural Heritage*, 7(1), 31-39. <https://doi.org/10.5860/rbm.7.1.254>
- Tamboukou, M. (2018). The joy of learning: Feminist materialist pedagogies and the freedom of education. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 50(9), 868–877. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2017.1396213>
- Vong, S. (2017). A constructivist approach for introducing undergraduate students to special collections and archival research. *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Cultural Heritage*, 17(2). <https://doi.org/10.5860/rbm.17.2.9666>
- Watson, S., Rex, C., Markgraf, J., Kishel, H., Jennings, E., & Hinnant, K. (2013). Revising the “one-shot” through lesson study: Collaborating with writing faculty to rebuild a library instruction session. *College & Research Libraries*, 74(4), 381-398. <https://doi.org/10.5860/crl12-255>
- Yee, K. (2013). Pedagogical gamification: Principles of video games that can enhance teaching. *To Improve the Academy*, 32(1): 335-349. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2334-4822.2013.tb00714.x>