Stories of Scribbling Women: Hands-on Research in Book History with Women's Studies Students

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A course redesign challenge

BYU Special Collections curators taught an Honors Western Civilization survey course with our collections for over two decades, but after a reboot of the Honors curriculum the course was dropped. A new opportunity arose in 2014 when the Women’s Studies program wanted to expand their offerings. But the course needed a major overhaul in order to:

• Upgrade the course academic requirements from those of a lower-level survey class to those of an upper-level special topics class, including greater expectations for original research and writing.
• Incorporate a greater level of women’s history content to meet Women’s Studies program requirements.
• Adopt the learning outcomes of a different college.
• Differentiate this course from a design-centered history of the book course taught in the editing program.

Course design solutions

• Retain basic course structure, but focus on women’s history, from the rise of literacy to digital publishing.
• Introduce students to basic theories in book history, taught nowhere else on campus. Use a simple framework (Thomas Adams & Nicholas Barker’s “life cycle of a book” model) to focus on women’s interaction with texts through history.
• Along the way, consider historical trends in women’s literacy and education, women’s participation in the book trades, and women as writers and artists.
• Create a hands-on research project which allows students to apply their learning by exploring the life cycle of a particular book.

Hands-on classroom experiences

Students handle a variety of Special Collections material in the classroom. Favorites have included a medieval book of hours, 17th and 18th century courtesy manuals, 18th and 19th century novels, 19th century periodicals (including Mormon women’s periodicals), and mid-20th century women’s magazines. In its most recent iteration, the class visited the Marriott Library Special Collections at the University of Utah to view zines and contemporary artists’ books.

Creating a research assignment

Students choose a research subject from a group of 17th and 18th century books by women in English from Special Collections.

• An underused subset of the rare book collection—18th century literature is not a collecting focus
• Allows students to examine a book that has both familiar and unfamiliar features

Each part of the assignment is delivered sequentially and ties in with one or more aspects of the “life cycle” model:

2. Create a bibliography of research sources about the book’s printer and/or publisher.
3. Describe the physical features of book. [Students are given the chance to consult with library conservation staff since this is an unfamiliar skill.]
4. Research the book’s provenance based on physical features and library metadata.
5. Transcribe and edit a short passage from the text and write an essay about the process. How does print culture of the 17th/18th century compare to print culture today?
6. Write a final essay which synthesizes the information gathered during your research into a portrait of the book. Reflect on how the book fits into the “life cycle” model and/or with other issues and trends you’ve studied in book history.

Course structure

Course Readings:
Articles and chapters from major works of book history and women’s history interspersed with primary source readings which exemplify women’s thoughts across different periods about women’s literacy and education and women as creators and consumers of texts. Authors include Christine de Pisan, Margaret Cavendish, Mary Wollstonecraft, George Eliot, and Betty Friedan.

Major Course Topics:
• What is book history?
• Technological shifts: orality to literacy, manuscript to print, print to digital
• The codex
• Women’s employment in the book trades
• Print culture from 15th to 20th centuries
• Women’s literacy and education over time
• Historical trends in reading practices
• Literature for women (books of hours, conduct books, devotional literature)
• The novel
• Women’s interactions with mass media, including the impact of first, second, and third wave feminism

Course learning outcomes

• Students will be able to demonstrate knowledge of the ways that the history of books have intersected with and affected women’s lives.
• Students will be able to demonstrate knowledge of the contributions of women (individually and collectively) to the art and history of books in the West.
• Students will be able to read, write, and think analytically. They will be able to demonstrate how to handle and interpret physical objects. They will be able to conduct research in an archives and rare books library using primary and secondary sources and communicate that research effectively in oral, written, and multi-media presentations.

• These learning outcomes were based on program outcomes for the BYU Women’s Studies program, English Department, and History Department. For more information, see http://learningoutcomes.byu.edu
• Questions? Contact me at maggie_kopp@byu.edu

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Course handout, from The Book History Reader

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