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Portable Pedagogy: Neighborhood Archives through Graduate Service Learning

Kristina Bross

What is an early Americanist to do when, as a specialist in seventeenth-century New England culture, she finds herself teaching in the Midwest, at a land-grant university full of STEM pride, far from the key landscapes, archives, and repositories that are at the core of her research? How can she possibly introduce graduate students to the pleasures of puzzling out Puritan handwriting, scrying the reception of pamphlets by peering at their marginalia, even—as one early American scholar reports (and regrets)—holding a lock of Daniel Webster’s hair and forging a personal connection with her subject across the centuries?¹ My solution: to stop reifying my “key archives” as rich mines of historic and cultural gems just waiting to be discovered, plucked up, polished, and displayed. Instead, I use the best approaches of American studies to introduce graduate students to method and theory, to work locally, and above all to connect our passion and scholarship with our community.

Of course, in my graduate seminars I still ask my students to explore early American archives, which are for us accessible through new critical editions and especially through digital resources such as *Early American Imprints*, *Early English Books Online*, and *Sabin Americana*. But as useful as these resources are, if students engage in archival research only at a digital distance, they have a limited view on its possibilities. And we know that access to the grand digital collections of the field is not universal.² So, in a graduate seminar titled Archival Theory and Practice, I ask students to work with and for more modest collections: three generations of family letters, still held by the granddaughter; the eclectic holdings of the local historical association, chronically underfunded and understaffed; the sparse records but deep memories of a Chinese Christian church; a small, idiosyncratic collection of materials owned by the local public library; and our university archives, which unlike the others is professionally administered and (happily) climate-controlled, but which hired its first professional archivist—its current director—only in 2003.

The course has been made possible by the American Studies program, both intellectually and logistically. For the pilot in 2003, I worked with a colleague in the Rhetoric and Composition program and another in the Department of History (with whom I continue to team-teach) to develop the course.³ As anyone familiar with higher ed bureaucracy knows, at least at public universities, it can be difficult to get permission to team-teach, much less to triple team-teach. American studies as institutional home acts as an advocate for the kind of cross-disciplinary, innovative instruction to which we aspire. A word about the labor of team-teaching in the course: we operate collaboratively, meeting as faculty once a week to discuss the readings and outline the discussion, and because this is a seminar, we have the luxury of small numbers, so that both faculty members read and comment on all assignments. The only division of labor tends to come through mentoring, with each of us taking on responsibility for projects closest to our hearts and expertise. Moreover, to serve our community partners better, we have drawn on the American Studies Community Partnership program to support a “neighborhood block party” in which we rolled out our findings and invited our community partners to present their holdings to a wider audience.

We aim to teach graduate students how to use archives by showing them how archival collections are made, which has the collateral effect of making the labor of archivists visible to them as researchers. In the seminar, students are asked to move from discussing theoretical concerns (in readings by Jacques Derrida, Carolyn Steedman, Roland Barthes, Gayatri Spivak), to troubleshooting the ways we determine which materials have “enduring value,” to identifying how finding aids and indexes both enable and limit research possibilities, to learning how to see what *is not* in the archives, whether the absence is due to pragmatic realities (not enough space) or to unconscious bias. They work with original materials held by our various community partners, groups, and institutions that do not have the staff and resources to do archival processing themselves, working in close consultation with Purdue University archivists, to make inventories, organize, offer useful descriptions of collections, and when necessary take preliminary steps to preserve the materials.⁴

Students match their service-learning assignments with traditional academic work (a conference-length paper), but the semester does not end with the paper. We insist that our students consider how their findings matter to the wider community. We envision that service-learning relationship as one of “neighborliness.” Early on in this pedagogical experiment, we realized that the community of West Lafayette did not have a well-developed sense of its

own history. Purdue has an articulated past and a newly organized archive. The county has a private nonprofit historical association that interprets its past, beginning in the colonial period. But West Lafayette is all-too-often thought of as simply the bedroom of Purdue University. Rather than think about ourselves as scholars set within a community from which we stand apart and interpret, we wanted instead to imagine our relationship as one of neighbors working together to recover and define our common history.

Thus the final, and perhaps most crucial, requirement of the course is for students to translate their findings for a nonacademic audience of interested community members, to tell the story of our past to our neighbors. Fulfilling this requirement has taken the form of a “history block party,” including talks, poster programs, workshops, and interactive displays about local history and culture. In presenting work to our neighbors, students get a concrete lesson in adapting their findings to different audiences and in being accountable to the public while maintaining a properly critical and scholarly viewpoint. In short, they become practicing public intellectuals.

One result of this experiment in archival theory and community service is a portable pedagogy: the approach, goals, and methods can be adapted for a variety of courses and community needs. Indeed, I have adapted its methodology to undergraduate courses in which students have helped index collections and have transcribed documents, and we have partnered with community groups with needs ranging from getting physical control over fragile materials to launching research centers. The project instructs students in archival research and theory, but it does not depend on major collections to do so. Rather, students learn by being embedded in communities and institutions with small but rich collections. The result has been greater historical consciousness in the community and deeper knowledge on the part of students about the promises—and the limits—of archival research.

Notes

This project and essay would not have been possible without the assistance and support of Susan Curtis, my coteacher and collaborator on so many archival teaching and research experiments, and without the enthusiastic participation of our community partners, especially the West Lafayette Public Library.

1. Jill Lepore, “Historians Who Love Too Much: Reflections on Microhistory and Biography,” *Journal of American History* 88.1 (2001): 129–44.
2. Ellen Wexler, “Subscription Scare Fuels Worries over Who Controls Data That Scholars Need,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 30, 2015, chronicle.com/article/Subscription-Scare-Fuels/234003?cid=rc_right.

3. Shirley Rose, now at Arizona State University, and Susan Curtis. My special thanks go to Susan, who offered valuable advice on this account of our collaboration.
4. Thanks are due to the generous staff of Purdue's archives, in particular Director Sammie Morris and Elizabeth Wilkinson, now curator of manuscripts at the Georgetown University Booth Family Center for Special Collections.