

**From Credit to Public Course: Teaching the History of the Book to a Wider
Audience.**

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What is book history? Those teaching this discipline would easily offer a concise explanation. Book history takes into account the various functions of books, as examples of the graphic and typographical arts, as physical objects, as transmitters of ideas, and as influences on society. Indeed, we could easily borrow similar methodological statements from historians who have attempted to define, and redefine, book history in the last two decades. We are probably all familiar with those seminal essays by scholars such as Robert Darnton, G. Thomas Tanselle, and Roger Chartier. For example, in his 2004 essay “Crossing Borders in Early Modern Europe” Chartier strongly argues that any textual interpretation should also include an examination of how the text in question was materialized.

For a long time within the Western tradition, the interpretation of texts, whether they were canonical or not, was separated from the analysis of the technical and social conditions of their publication and circulation. There are many reasons for this dissociation: the permanence of the opposition between the perfect purity of the idea and the corruption by the matter, the invention of copyright that established the author’s property in a text considered as always identical, whatever the form of its publication, or again the triumph of an aesthetics that judged works independently of their different and successive materialities.

Furthermore, the relatively recent popularity of book history as a discipline can be measured by the fact that an increasing number of courses on the history of the book are being offered at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. This is indeed a critical opportunity not only to highlight the relevance of other related disciplines such as bibliography, a subject traditionally studied in the margins of academe, but also to encourage active collaboration between faculty and special collections librarians. In fact, I would go even further to argue that instruction in book history or bibliography should be the ultimate ideal goal in our efforts to introduce rare books in the curriculum. How are students going to do research using rare books if they are not exposed to basic bibliographical concepts such as format, signature, and collation formula, not to mention broader topics like the development of typography, the identification of illustration techniques, and the history of book bindings?

As a result of my outreach efforts to promote special collections through class presentations, lectures, onsite exhibits, and digital initiatives such as “The Book of the Month” [slide #2], in 2006 I was invited to design and teach an undergraduate level class, a freshman course within the University of Rochester’s “Quest Program” to be specific [slide #3]. Entitled “The History of the Book in the West”, it is hosted by the Department of History, and taught in a seminar room at the Department of Rare Books & Special Collections. Currently, this course has already acquired a quasi-permanent status in the curriculum of the Department of History. Needless to say, teaching this class has enriched my work as a curator, allowing me to have a better understanding not only of the teaching potential of the rare book collection but also of the needs and expectations of the undergraduate community. Furthermore, it has been the inspiration to create a shorter version, a six-week course with lectures lasting one hour and a half each, and intended to promote rare books to a broader and diverse audience within the Rochester

community. In fact, I have already taught this course three times. It is offered through the so-called Office of Special Programs and Part-Time Studies, a vestige of what was originally Extension Teaching at the University of Rochester. It is this non-credit course open to the community that I would like to discuss further in this paper.

Although this is not the place to digress at length on the origin and development of Extension University in North America, a brief summary will be appropriate here in order to defend the long-term educational value of teaching a book history course, particularly if one has to deal with an administration that consider formal teaching a disruption from other more pressing library duties.

The earliest university extension initiatives were begun in the 1870s by Cambridge, Oxford, and the London Society for the Extension of University Teaching. The overall philosophy was to extend access to higher education beyond the small number of privileged young men admitted to Oxford and Cambridge. The English model of university extension came to North America in the 1880s and 1890s. Although the notion of democratizing higher education was still relevant, the American model of extension focused on providing a range of scholarly and professional services to communities and industries. In other words, the main goal was not to make university lectures accessible in an off-campus setting, but to adjust the extension curriculum to the needs of the state and the citizens. For instance, in the first decades of the twentieth century, the staff of the department of extension at the University of Alberta (Canada) took travelling libraries and “magic lantern” slide shows to rural Alberta [**slide # 4, 5**]. Therefore, it is not surprising that non-credit courses designed for professionals and the community in general always played a central role in the history of university extension. At

present, non-credit classes offered at university extension can be divided into three main categories: contract programs, continuing professional education programs, and personal enrichment programs. Whereas the first two are designed to serve the needs of companies and individuals who must update their skills, the third type of program is developed exclusively for the community. Obviously, a non-credit course on book history would belong to the so-called personal enrichment program, whose ideal purpose is to stimulate intellectually lifelong learners and, and according to one expert in adult education, to provide greater meaning in their lives. Though it would be pretentious, and probably unrealistic, to say that I was able to provide greater meaning to the lives of my students, I will try to make the case for the intellectual stimulation.

In order to understand what and how I teach, it would be useful to explain first what this course is not about. It has little to do with an antique road show, for example. Acknowledging that questions about monetary values are only discussed marginally, the emphasis being on how knowledge of bibliography, and book history in general, can benefit collectors. As outlined by historians of the book, one of the main themes of the course is the tension between the text, an abstraction, and the book as a physical artifact, beginning with the early manifestations of writing up to the digital age. Through the display of artifacts from our collection, students have the opportunity to learn about the cuneiform script on clay tablets from the Old Babylonian period in the early second millennium BC. **[slide # 6,7]**. They also learn about the most important transformations in the materiality of the text. The evolution from scroll to codex, including its earliest expressions in the form of wooden tablets, and the introduction of paper in Europe in the eleventh century, which would gradually replace books made of vellum or parchment. Admittedly, the focus of the course is the hand-made period or the three centuries following the invention of printing by moveable type. Students are first instructed in the anatomy

of the book, including descriptions of the manufacture of paper and type, how printing is done, and even an account of the making of bindings [slide # 8] . There is also ample room for broader topics related to the impact of printing on the transmission of ideas and on the society of Early Modern Europe. For instance, here are two of these themes. The first is the idea of tension and continuity. Specifically, it is applied to examples of early printed books since they often raise questions on the conflict between the old and the new worlds. Are the illuminated initial and the rubrication on a printed page a sign of continuity with the manuscript tradition? [slide # 9]. Why did Erhard Ratdolt, a German printer from Augsburg who worked at Venice in the last two decades of the fifteenth century, insert a medieval T-O map of the world when a modern version of Ptolemy geography was then available? [slide # 10] The second theme is censorship as it was put into practice in the sixteenth century. [slide # 11] In our copy of the second edition of Copernicus' *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium* we see that in the title page two proper names have been pasted down: Joachin Rheticus and Johann Schöner [slide # 12]. Our copy also shows each of the ten emendations issued by the Holy Inquisition in Decree XXI, 1620, corrections not intended to obliterate but designed to make Copernicus' thesis appear hypothetical [slide # 13, 14]. Similarly, the name of the protestant scholar Sebastian Münster has been crossed out from our copy of his 1545 edition of Ptolemy's *Geography* [slide # 15]. In my teaching experience, selected topics such as continuity with the past and censorship are ideal for thought provoking discussions since students are able to establish connections with the present. Does the idea of tradition in early Modern Europe challenge our definition of progress? How original actually is our computer screen? What is the most effective form of censorship?

Students who enroll in this course are of different backgrounds and ages [slide # 16]. On the first occasion I offered this class, the group consisted of two recent U of R graduates, a graduate student of Library Science, a retired high-school teacher, two second-hand book sellers, a book artist, two professionals working at the University of Rochester, and a pediatrician. Ages ranged from the mid-twenties to the early seventies. However, a common feature soon became apparent: They all looked forward to this class as a unique opportunity to handle special collection artifacts as opposed to the second-hand experience derived from onsite and digital exhibits. Curiously, their eagerness to learn about how these books were constructed, about their anatomy, somehow reminded me of the increasing popularity of documentaries that recreate old technology, like those reconstructing the dream machines originally designed by Leonardo da Vinci, or Gutenberg's invention itself as described in the 2008 BBC film, "The Machine that Made Us". Furthermore, the close examination of books as physical objects can also reveal a personal story that intimately connects the student with the past. I am now referring to the copy-specific aspects of books showing the ways they were owned, read, and bound. Again, here are two examples I have presented in my lectures. [slide #17] First, in our copy of Erasmus' *editio princeps* of St. Jerome's opus (1516), both the hand-colored bookplate and the Latin inscription (*Duplum Bibliothecae regiae Monacensis*) on the front pastedown paper of each of the five volumes tell us part of the provenance history of the set. It belonged to Ioannes Ecker, probably a rich landowner—as suggested by the harrow on his "coat of arms"—and a magistrate (*prepositus*) of the town of Schäftlarn. Eventually these volumes came to reside in the local monastery. Located not far from Munich in Upper Bavaria, the monastery was originally a Premonstratensian abbey, founded in 762 by the priest Waltrich. After being destroyed by fire in 1527, it was rebuilt at the end of the sixteenth century, and continued as an abbey until its

secularization in 1803. In 1865 King Louis I of Bavaria purchased it for 92,000 gulden, and gave it to the Benedictines the following year. It is likely that this set was eventually sold on the grounds of being a duplicate (*duplum*). [slide #18] The second example is our copy of the *Satires* by Juvenal and Persius, published by John Baskerville in 1761, and heavily annotated in Latin. A previous owner was a student probably recording the learned comments by a lecturer or tutor—one of the handwritten inscriptions on the front endpaper says: “Eton 1802.” For instance, on the upper margin we read a brief summary of Latin authors who wrote satire. In the text itself, there are glosses such as the definition of the stanza used by Juvenal—an alternating succession of lines of hexameters and pentameters—and the word *togata*, a term commonly used to refer to Latin comedies: *comoedias Latinas, secundum habitum Romanum—Graecorum—pallium—Vel qui praetextas, vel qui docuere togatas.*

To conclude: I hope I was able to offer a fair overview of the scope and aims of this course. Essentially, it is a series of lectures on chosen topics within a strictly chronological frame. Then students are invited to discuss and handle the material. I admit it: a very traditional approach, indeed. One can also see this teaching initiative as an opportunity to reach out to the community, so that a more diverse public can participate in the activities organized by the department of special collections, such as exhibits, special lectures and receptions. More importantly, we should now take advantage of the great momentum in bibliographical studies to spread the word even among a non-scholarly audience that, as my experience confirms, doesn't accept the general perception of what a text or a book is said to be. In his past BSA Annual Lecture, “Books as History: Changing Values in a Digital Age,” David Pearson perfectly

summarized the paradox of how the overwhelming presence of the digital text will emphasize the role of the book as a physical object:

I also think that one of the reasons for maintaining this momentum is one that is arguably a little less positive, which is around the way in which the world at large is likely to change its perception of books, in a society where the transmission of texts relies increasingly on electronic networks rather than print on paper. In such a world, the primary importance of books as carriers of texts must, logically, diminish; and their value may come to rely more upon other characteristics, like their unique copy-specific properties, and their individual stories as physical objects.

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