

Bianca Falbo

TEACHING FROM THE ARCHIVES

MY FIRST THOUGHTS in response to the question “What’s so special about special collections?” were in relation to my own experience researching and writing about nineteenth-century Anglo-American literature and print culture. But like a lot of teachers, I find that my research informs my classroom practice and that my classroom practice, in turn, reinvigorates my research. Consequently, much of my thinking about this question comes out of my experience designing archival research projects for my undergraduate students. So, in response to why, at a time of increasingly sophisticated electronic resources for “preserving” and making available special collections materials, we should continue to develop and make use of our special collections libraries, I would like to talk briefly about what I have learned, alongside my students, about the ways that archival research transforms the intellectual work of the classroom.

Asking students to work with archival materials creates the opportunity for a more student-centered classroom. It transforms the traditional pedagogical model in which the teacher owns and disseminates information the students “lack.” A couple of examples will serve to illustrate. One of my favorite archival projects for students is to have them compile a class “anthology” focused on some issue or problem related to the course at large. For example, if I am teaching a course on nineteenth-century American literature, I might have students look at contemporary periodicals for material on establishing a national literary tradition. Another successful assignment requires students to use the special collections library to gather cultural materials they might compile if they were preparing an “authoritative” edition of a particular text we are reading. Although I frequently have students work with “original” materials

in class (a Xerox copy of a title page, a table of contents, a preface), I like projects that send students out of the classroom to the archives where they can experience the exigencies of archival work—locating and sorting through a range of different and likely unfamiliar texts, deciding what to read carefully and what to skim over. When they return to the classroom with notes or copies from their “mini-archives,” the work of looking (e.g., what they expected to find versus what they actually found) becomes part of our conversation.

Having students work with archival materials has two important consequences for my role as a teacher. First, I never know exactly what students will find; thus, I give up one kind of control over the content of the class. Instead of telling students what I know about materials I have preselected, I focus on how and why they chose their particular documents and what makes these documents meaningful to them in the context of the particular course issue(s) we are investigating.

Of course, students are often puzzled by what they find—especially when it is not what they expected—and this confusion is the basis of what I have found to be the other important pedagogical consequence of sending students to the archives. That is, confronted with the odd or unusual artifact, students must reconsider what they think they know about the work of reading and writing, about their experience making sense of a text. When students look through periodicals for the anthology assignment, for example, they collect materials from a range of “highbrow” and “popular” publications. But students are often surprised by what passes for “high” as opposed to “popular” culture. However, as they discuss how features of a publication could be said to construct a particular audience, they also talk their way through complex theoretical issues: how all texts construct readers; how readers inhabit, negotiate, and/or resist such idealized constructions. In addition, within a single periodical, students discover differently positioned debates about national literature in a range of genres (e.g., book reviews, letters to the editor, travel sketches, poems). Asked to think and write about the range of responses they have found, students learn how the debate is different in different print venues and that it

has more than two “sides.” Consequently, they see how acts of interpretation are always socially, historically, and culturally specific.

A word about one of the contexts for my own response here. I teach at a small liberal arts college that has devoted considerable funds and energy to providing its faculty with up-to-date computer technology. In the past year, I have been trying to design assignments that have students working with the growing number of online special collections libraries. So far, I have found these to be a valuable pedagogical resource as much for what they make available as for what they obscure. Obviously, these collections provide access to rare or hard-to-find archival materials. Beyond that, however, they also raise serious questions about issues of transcription. That is, electronic texts, like modern typographical editions, mute and sometimes mask altogether the very details of a text’s materiality that make it valuable for teaching. For example, when an electronic version makes only the “text” available, it reinforces the notion that “reading” is only about access to words, outside their cultural or historical context. Similarly, when a reader must scroll down in order to see an entire page, the material integrity of the text is compromised and the idea lost that elements such as size, and even the visual impression of seeing a whole page at once, inform the work interpretation. Of course, students can learn by discussing these kinds of issues about a text’s electronic transformation. At the same time, it bears saying that such issues remain invisible unless students also have the opportunity to sit in the library and work with the text or image on its own terms.