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From "Treasure Room" to "School Room": Special Collections and Education

Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary states that education involves learning and then defines learning as the acquisition of knowledge or understanding through study, instruction, or experience.[1] This is the best and broadest definition of the term I know of and the one that most closely informs what I do in my work as director of the Cushing Memorial Library and Archives at Texas A&M University. I consider any activity that provides opportunities for study or experience as education. In a special collections environment, this includes traditional classroom teaching as well as many other undertakings—exhibits, displays, guided and self-guided tours, lectures, readings, demonstrations, colloquia, symposia, conferences, publications of all kinds, Web-based projects, etc. These sorts of activities also could be classed under the term *outreach,* which suggests the active and conscious delivery of learning opportunities.

As special collections librarians, we are more involved than ever in reaching out to our traditional constituencies and in creating new ones. Many of our current efforts spring from the examples of those who have gone before us. One thinks, for instance, of the great tradition at Harvard begun by George Parker Winship and continued by William Jackson, W. H. Bond, and, more recently, Roger Stoddard. Generations of students have been influenced by their teaching. There also are many exciting examples of courses and innovative programs all around us now. A few of these (the University of Colorado, Marquette, San Diego, Columbia, and others) were recently highlighted in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*.[2] The topic of the 2005 annual RBMS Preconference and this issue of *RBM*, "Bridging the Gap: Education and Special Collections," is another indication of this increased activity and our interest in it. However, despite having skilled practitioners in our midst, giants in our past, and great examples of courses developed and other innovative

1. *Webster's Ninth Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, Mass.: Merriam–Webster, 1983).
2. Scott Carlson, "Special Effects," *Chronicle of Higher Education* 51, no. 41 (June 2005): A23–A25.

efforts, I think we lag behind the rest of the library profession in this area. Outreach and education have simply not been mainstays of our work, especially when compared to our colleagues in public and school libraries or even, for that matter, to the general academic library. For evidence of this, we need look no further than our balance sheets, where teaching and outreach are likely to fall, if they fall at all, very far down the list of funding priorities. I suspect that many, if not most of us, have no recurring budget for education. Instead, instructional and related activities tend to be funded on a project-by-project basis, which reinforces their less-than-primary status.

The difficulty is that we do not control the purse strings. The sort of funding required to make a difference usually comes from the university librarian (UL). The good news is that among ULs, our stock has never been higher. I do not want to put too great a gloss on things, for libraries everywhere are under funding pressure, but I believe we are better positioned than ever to lobby for more support for education. We are in the middle, after all, of a fairly remarkable building campaign. Since the late 1990s, I can think of several institutions that have built brand new areas or extensively renovated existing space for special collections, and I know of several others that have plans in the works to do so. This is occurring at a time when most colleges and universities are moving materials off-site instead of expanding central campus buildings to manage their circulating collections. The example of the University of Chicago, where a $42 million expansion of the Regenstein Library will result in the largest general academic library collection in the country under a single roof, is perhaps the exception that proves the rule.

Who could have thought thirty years ago that in the beginning of this new millennium (a time when many once predicted that there would be no more real—let alone "rare"—books in libraries), among the few new buildings contemplated for our main campuses would be facilities for special collections? Education and outreach are not only important for bringing people into these new spaces, they also are essential for justifying the expense of building them in the first place and continuing to maintain them. Another indication of increased interest is the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) Task Force on Special Collections, which has focused attention on such important topics as hidden collections and training for special collections librarians. This is a far cry from the days when our closed stacks and reading rooms were often thought of by our colleagues outside special collections as little more than places of peaceful pomp and undisturbed retreat.

Our first concern is—and always has been—supporting research and researchers. Thus, we emphasize the things that we see as directly contributing to the production of scholarship. Acquiring, cataloging, and preserving material are indeed core

activities and must remain so. But our commitment to teaching also must broaden and deepen. In addition to this being a good time for it, I believe that outreach is something we cannot afford to do without, regardless of the climate around us. It is simply the right thing to do. The collections in my library at Texas A&M belong to all the people of the state, the nation, and even the world. I know that sounds idealistic and perhaps even a bit corny, but we are a public institution. Moreover, we are a land grant university. With those twin mantles comes a special obligation to public education; it is in our very bones. Whether public, private, land grant, or otherwise, however, I think we all share a similar commitment to open access through education. Again, for my institution it is part of our mission. Beyond that, I also think that such an attitude simply makes good policy sense. None of us exists in a vacuum. We depend on support from others. The more people we serve, the broader our base of support is likely to be.

Because of this commitment to public education and open access, I would like to suggest a more conscious and deliberate effort to expand our view of who we serve. As mentioned above, our focus is usually on supporting research and the kinds of activities that directly impact it. But if all we concern ourselves with is access for researchers, most people will never have the opportunity to see the unique, inspiring, and educational items in our libraries because most people are never going to be researchers. Our educational programs are essential tools in sharing our collections with a greater number and broader range of individuals. Furthermore, as a profession we have talked a lot lately about "hidden collections." Our discussions on this topic usually concern some form of cataloging. That we properly describe, index, list, and catalog our collections is of vital importance. Yet, for the vast majority of people around us, our materials—cataloged or not—remain hidden. Exhibits, programming, lectures, and other educational activities are additional means of exposing collections to researchers as well as to others.

Whether or not we reach out, there is an increasing desire to reach in. Education is the primary tool for meeting and managing that desire. We live in an age when more of us than ever before have the time and means to appreciate materials of cultural, historic, artistic, and totemic significance, and more of us than ever before are doing so. A recent study from the JFK School of Government reports that the last quarter of the twentieth century saw an unprecedented growth in museum attendance, in the number and size of exhibits, in overall funding, and in the creation of new institutions.[3] I draw this example from the museum world, and I think our story is similar. There is increased interest in our collections. Think, for example, of

3. Jane Preston, *Museums in the United States at the Turn of the Millennium: An Industry Note* (Cambridge, Mass.: Hauser Center for Nonprofit Management at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government, 2001).

the large number of popular books, both fiction and nonfiction, published over the past few years that are set around, or have something to do with, archives and rare books. Nicholas Basbanes has published a whole series on collecting and libraries that has found a readership far beyond professional circles.[4]

At my institution, the first thing a visitor sees on entering the front door are several exhibit cases with (usually) books displayed under glass. But sometimes other artifacts are displayed as well. Before making his way to the reading room on the second floor, he passes through another gallery. And in the reading room, he is surrounded by a large collection of nineteenth-century German genre paintings. The only real difference a visitor might notice between a traditional museum and my library is that we provide a large and prominent space where one can actually handle objects that on another day might be relegated to an exhibit case. But most visitors, in fact, do not notice this difference. Nearly half the 6,000 or so people who visit us annually do not come to handle the books anyway; instead, they come to view exhibits, attend lectures, see the building, etc.

This increased desire to see the materials we preserve was brought home to me a few years ago when reading in the *Austin American Statesman* about a neighbor of mine in Texas—the Harry Ransom Center (HRC). The article concerned the reopening of the HRC after renovation and made the point that the new Bob Bullock Texas History Museum, just a few blocks away, could boast 600,000 visitors in its first eight months, whereas the HRC attracted fewer than 100,000 in the entire previous decade.[5] Of course, the comparison is grossly unfair. The Bullock has no permanent collections. The HRC is a research library. But if one is going to compare visitor statistics, why not also compare the number of books researched in each facility? This comparison, too, is inappropriate because the two entities have different missions. Or do they? When you possess both Scarlet O'Hara's evening gown and the Gutenberg Bible, you have an obligation. That is why the HRC undertook a $14 million renovation, after all. The Bullock does not have a mandate to serve scholarship; the HRC does. Like the Bullock, however, the latter recognizes that it also has an obligation to share material of cultural value with as broad a swath of society and as large a number of people as it can. People know we have stuff, and they want to see it. It is in our interest to find a way to accomplish this. Indeed, it would be an abdication of our responsibility if we did not.

4. See, for example, Basbanes's *Gentle Madness* (New York: H. Holt and Co., 1995), *Patience and Fortitude* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), *A Splendor of Letters* (New York: Harper Collins, 2003), and others.

5. Michael Barnes, "Opening Up Harry Ransom's Fortress," *Austin American Statesman* (Feb. 19, 2002): A1.

Another evidence of increased demand can be seen in the proliferation of media outlets that deal in some form of cultural programming. NPR, PRI, BBC, A&E, HGTV, TLC, and PBS are just a few of the initialisms in a growing alphabet soup of new media outlets. And anyone who owns or has rented a car with satellite radio ought to have a glimpse of what might be in store for us as the demand by these outlets for cultural content increases. With a few exceptions, none of these existed thirty years ago. Yet, these entities and others like them make up a significant and growing segment of the user population in my library. For them, we are vast reservoirs of raw material. Close on the heels of this new class of users are many other new and nontraditional patrons. Where once the rare book room was thought of as mostly the province of single-minded scholars writing specialized tomes destined to be read by only tenure review committees, increasingly we are being utilized by everybody from journalists to graphic art designers to t-shirt manufacturers to documentary film producers to PR and marketing firms to Web designers. However, I also have detected a growing desire among those single-minded scholars I just mentioned to reach a wider audience, inspired in part by the power of the Web, but also because tenure review committees are asking for demonstrations of wider impact.

The new and ever increasing number of media outlets are both responding to and encouraging the same forces that we are—or should be—responding to and encouraging with our educational programs, and they are the same forces that drive the statistics I mentioned earlier. But the primary difference between what they offer and what we offer is authenticity. They can only offer a digital or electronic representation. Though we also rely on digital and electronic tools, we have the obligation to preserve the original—which brings me to my next point. The suggestion that teaching from our collections is important to their survival may seem counterintuitive, for such activity will result in more exposure and more exposure could result in damage. We spend enormous amounts of time and money making sure that our collections are properly stored and carefully handled. We quite rightly resist any activity that poses a risk to them, including teaching. There is no disputing the fact that integrating rare materials into classroom assignments could result in a kind and frequency of handling that they would not likely be subject to if they are reserved exclusively for research. But in making this point, I am suggesting that in the interests of the overall institution (and even the larger culture) it may be worth increased exposure to certain individual items for a larger good.

Technology has given us the ability to record and reproduce documents with amazing speed and at ever lower costs. This is one of the great blessings of our age and allows us to preserve and share materials across time and space in ways we could not even imagine a few years ago. Couple this ability with the cost of creating and

retaining high-quality storage space for physical objects and it is easy to fall into the trap of thinking that a digital surrogate is an acceptable replacement for the thing itself. In such a world there is a temptation to devalue or disregard the original object after it has been scanned or otherwise captured electronically. The Modern Language Association took on this very subject a few years ago. In its "Statement on the Significance of Primary Records" we read: "it is crucial for the future of humanistic study to make more widely understood the continuing value of the artifacts themselves for reading and research … Without broad public perception of the significance of this point, sizable portions of certain classes of textual artifacts face destruction."[6]

By finding ways to bring our collections to the classroom and the classroom to our collections, we help educate future generations about the importance of primary records while advancing our mission to preserve the raw materials of research. Ken Osborne has made a similar argument for teaching in archives, writing that "by not engaging in educational work, archives deny themselves of the possibility of building and benefiting from the support of a knowledgeable and sympathetic public."[7] Placing more emphasis on teaching and learning does not neglect our duty to preservation, and hence research, but, rather, supports and reinforces that duty. In proposing that our profession make a more significant investment in education as a means of heightening awareness of the "nondigital" value of primary artifacts, I am not suggesting that we reject, resist, or fear technology. To the contrary, technology is a powerful tool for mitigating the risk. And digital records are artifacts, too, so technology stands as much to gain as do old-fashioned books and paper from our increased appreciation. A better appreciation of the value of all kinds of texts in their primary form is essential to meeting the challenge of preserving the digital record as well as paper, parchment, and other artifacts.

Perhaps at this point it might be useful to picture a different arrangement of priorities. Imagine, if you will, a special collections library organized not around collections, but around teaching and learning. What would our libraries look like if education were the first thing that we funded—or at least not the last? How would our operations be organized? How would our staff be distributed? How would our collections be deployed? And how would all these things differ from our current arrangements?

I can suggest several answers. If education in all our programs was something that was funded in a significant and permanent way, I imagine that our mission

6. "Statement on the Significance of Primary Records," *Profession 95* (1995): 27.
7. Ken Osborne, "Archives in the Classroom," *Archivaria* 23 (winter 1986–1987): 17.

statements, Web pages, newsletters, and other publications would make more prominent and frequent reference to teaching and learning. To draw another example from our friends in the museum world, we would more commonly produce statements for internal and external purposes such as the following from the Field Museum's mission statement (whose preamble, by the way, is subtitled "Serving the Public as Educator"): "The Field Museum is an educational institution concerned with the diversity and relationships in nature and among cultures. It provides collection-based research and learning for greater public understanding and appreciation of the world in which we live."[8]

Another answer: if learning were closer to the heart of what we do, we would more commonly have departments or units called "education" or "learning" and people within our ranks with titles such as manager of instructional services or curator for outreach and education or program officer. And if we cannot afford such a position, perhaps more of us would have the sort of duties associated with these titles written into our job descriptions. At Texas A&M, we recently hired a curator of outreach. This is the first time we have had such a position, and I believe it is one of, if not the first, example of such a position in an academic special collections library. The duties carried out by this individual include coordinating public and media relations, bibliographic instruction, exhibits, events, and publications.[9] Our bibliographic instruction program involves presentations to classes (both one-off and as regular course components) as well as group and individual tours. We have two exhibit spaces occupying more than 4,000 square feet between them. We typically mount five to six exhibits a year in these spaces as well as contribute items to exhibits elsewhere and occasionally travel one of our own. Our events include lectures, receptions, book signings, workshops, and symposia. We publish everything from catalogs to leaflets to Web exhibits. And, of course, all these things require press releases, responses to

8. "Mission Statement," The Field Museum, 2 May 2005. Available online at http://www.fieldmuseum.org/museum_info/mission_statement.htm.

9. Given the many requests I have received for information on this position since delivering this talk in the summer of 2005, I thought readers might be interested in the responsibilities as described in the official position description: "Reporting to the Director of the Cushing Memorial Library and Archives, Texas A&M University Libraries, the Curator for Outreach works closely with the Director and other Cushing faculty and staff to coordinate, participate in, and assist with the library's outreach efforts, including exhibits, public programs, promotional and interpretive publications (both in print and web-based), and educational activities. The Curator draws on expertise and assistance from a wide variety of sources and individuals in fulfillment of these duties. The Curator is responsible for assisting in the organization and coordination of the scheduling, planning, designing, and construction of exhibits. He or she coordinates the scheduling and coordination of public programs such as lectures, receptions, symposia, and other events, both recurring and nonrecurring. He or she provides editorial oversight and management for the publication of keepsakes, pamphlets, broadsides, catalogs, and other promotional and interpretive material, both in print and via the web. He or she coordinates and participates in activities such as tours and class visits and assists in the development of strategies and policies involving the use of Cushing collections in classroom curricula and projects."

media inquiries, and other promotional undertakings. Even the briefest consideration of these activities suggests more than a full-time job.

If education were a higher priority, our library schools might more commonly offer subspecialties in teaching or combined degrees with museum studies or education. Furthermore, there would be a far greater emphasis on subject specialization. Compared to the rest of our profession, I think there is already greater emphasis within our ranks. A central place for learning would push that emphasis even further. In college and university settings, we would more frequently find joint appointments between the library and academic departments for individuals other than the director or department head. I can easily imagine special collections librarians also serving on the faculties of any number of departments and colleges, and not just those in the humanities and liberal arts.

We also would find greater emphasis on what I think of as the curatorial model. What is a curator? I think of a curator as an advanced subject specialist with a strong service ethic, perhaps a little like a county extension agent. Coming from a land grant university, this is an easy connection for me to make and it provides a very useful way of thinking about our duties in relation to education and outreach. Like the extension agent, the ideal curator should have advanced training and subject expertise in a particular discipline. She also may maintain an active research agenda and be well known in a particular scholarly community. But also like the extension agent, the curator should have a strong service ethic as well as a commitment to public education. She should be a great communicator, someone who can express arcane information in a manner that is respectful, easily accessible, and at least interesting, if not exciting.

Moreover, if teaching and learning were a higher priority in our profession, classrooms would be as common in our facilities as reading rooms. I mentioned earlier that we are in the middle of a remarkable building campaign, but we still tend to give short shrift to teaching space. Reading rooms, event spaces, and exhibition halls all take a higher priority, with teaching space usually claimed on an ad hoc basis in an area primarily devoted to another activity. I realize that there is never enough money to design the perfect building or facility, and setting aside a room capable of accommodating thirty to forty people exclusively for teaching is costly. But if we cannot afford a dedicated room, we can at least better accommodate teaching in a multipurpose area. The key, I think, is fully integrating education into the planning process rather than considering it after the fact.

With more emphasis on education and outreach, we would find ourselves giving more attention to building collections for teaching purposes, and in the process we

might discover that by building teaching collections we also can build research collections. Rare Book School is our best example of this. The accrual of so much material in one place for teaching has resulted in a wonderful collection for the study of the book as a material object. I hasten to point out that RBS is not a research library, and I hope this reference will not result in hoards of research requests. My point is simply that by building teaching collections we also can assemble collections of great breadth and depth.

These are just a few of the differences I can imagine. I know that in some places, usually the largest special collections, education is a higher priority than I have suggested. I am speaking more of differences of degree than kind—all of the above would be more common everywhere. Do I think as a profession that we should abandon our current orientation, which emphasizes research support, for a model that places education first? No. But I do think that a greater emphasis on teaching could help us better serve our larger organizations and perhaps, thinking grandly, even society as a whole.

I realize that the changes I have been describing may seem overwhelming. Who among us, after all, has all the resources necessary to catalog and process our collections? And here I am saying that we need to take on a whole new set of duties! Again, I would simply counter that not making education and outreach a higher priority will ultimately cost more because it erodes our most important capital—an enlightened, engaged, and supportive public. I do not feel overwhelmed or discouraged by these challenges. To the contrary, they excite me. There has never been a better time to expand, renew, or begin an effort to more thoroughly integrate our collections into the educational enterprise.

I have referred to museums frequently in the course of this talk. I do so because I believe the museum provides a good model for us to emulate. Museum professionals strive to play a major role in public education. Sir Henry Cole is thought of as the pioneer in this regard. In founding the Victoria and Albert Museum, he envisioned a "schoolroom" for the nation. In this age of increased demand, expectation, competition, and accountability, I think we must double our efforts to provide access and promote understanding, and I believe education and outreach are the best means for doing this. As I have already mentioned, it was not too long ago that we were often thought of as treasure rooms. Perhaps in some ways we still define our professional obligations in this way, thinking of ourselves primarily as guardians of the things we house. We should not be content with this role, however. In keeping with Cole's vision and an ever increasing demand for access and understanding, we should present and see ourselves as teachers in schoolrooms.