MLA 2020 Session: Bibliopedagogy
Paper: "Student-Scribe: A Hands-On Approach to Codicology and Book History"
Sarah Banschbach Valles, Texas Tech University (sbanschbach@ttu.edu)
Sarah J. Sprouse, The University of Alabama (sjsprouse@ua.edu)

Intro (SJS): Hands-on – what do you do if it's all online

One of the fundamental problems with Book History courses for many American institutions is the lack of resources available to put students in a room with a real medieval manuscript or a book printed before 1800. There are many wonderful digital facsimiles available, but they lack the tactile experience – a problem that can actually hinder codicological research. [SLIDE] In the case of undergraduate students who have never before seen a manuscript, this issue also means the inability to see collation, watermarks, and simply *touch* vellum. Sarah and I developed our Book History course from the premise that students would largely have to work with facsimiles and print materials. Texas Tech University, where we taught the class, has some limited resources in their Special Collections, but nothing comparable to larger institutions like the Beinecke or even the Ransom Center. If we wanted our students to *experience* a manuscript, we were going to have to get creative in our approach. We developed a semester-long project that not only addressed the problem of access to manuscripts, but also served to acquaint students with scholarly editing practices and digital humanities. [SLIDE] This is the Commonplace Book Project. Today we will talk about what this project

is, how we designed it, and how it ultimately worked. We will discuss the methodology, give an overview of the assignments connected to this project, reflect on the pedagogical lessons learned from this course design, and offer some advice on acquiring materials for such a course.

Methodology of the Approach (SBV):

[SLIDE] Before articulating the method behind our approach to teaching book history, we want to briefly mention our rationale for teaching this course as well as offer some ideas for implementing a book history course at other institutions. Sarah Sprouse participated in Timothy Graham's month-long codicology workshop in New Mexico in the second year of her PhD program. The workshop proved fundamental to her dissertation while Graham's hands-on pedagogical model fostered her interest in experiential learning. I became a board member of the Tech Book History club early on, and later attended the Rare Book School's course "Teaching Book History." Between the two of us, we thought it would not only be fun to teach book history, but such an experience would help us develop our own understanding of the subject. We were also interested in deepening our awareness of how material culture and literature dovetail. In many ways, teaching the class was an opportunity to learn more about a topic we enjoy, to design a unique course that experimented with a new pedagogical model, and to bring book history to undergrads. Too often it seems undergrads are left out of the

exciting part of scholarship – the part that involves going to the archive and holding primary sources in your hands; the part that involves accounting for the people who wrote, and created, and read the text; the part that involves thinking about a text beyond what is on the page. [SLIDE] *National Treasure* or *Indiana Jones* or *The Da Vinci Code* or Jedi manuscripts are often the only point of reference students have for these kinds of concerns. Giving undergrads a glimpse into what legitimate, advanced research is like and letting them see beyond a Norton Anthology or a Cambridge Companion or the "literature as book club" mentality creates an entirely new appreciation for scholarship and research. In this way, perhaps, book history could serve as one of the methods of preserving the humanities. Allowing undergrad students to see and participate in what scholars and editors *do* creates a basis for appreciative support of that work.

We determined that a book history class as we envisioned it would best be taught at an upper division junior or senior level. This is not to say that book history could not be taught at a sophomore level, but per the lower division requirements of our institution and due to our particular course design, students in the major would most benefit. However, our department's course catalogue did not have an undergraduate course number for book history. Because our proposed course covered medieval to early modern, we thought perhaps we could try to mold it into the course designation for Middle English. We met with the head of

the undergrad curriculum committee and proposed our class. To our benefit, the faculty member was involved in the book history club and had been intending to brave the institutional hoops of creating a new course number for a book history class. Adding a course number to the catalogue is a lengthy process and is not one in which graduate students have a say, so after drafting a formal proposal for the department, we were given permission to teach a trial run book history course under the aegis of a Middle English class. We include this information because, if your institution does not already have a book history course designation or have a general special topics course, it may be helpful in crafting your own approach.

In designing the format of the course, we had three primary goals. [SLIDE] First, we wanted students to have as much contact with manuscripts as possible – both in person and online; second, we wanted students to learn through doing; third, we wanted to emphasize the socio-political and collaborative aspects of books as physical objects in order to decenter "the author" and the stability of "the text."

To fulfill our goals, it was important to us to have as much hands-on time as possible. We were able to request a MWF class schedule, and organized our week with readings on Monday, time in Special Collections or with activities on Wednesday, and recap on Friday. We met with our Special Collections librarian the semester prior to our course and together worked out an outline and workflow

of the course that would best incorporate the materials at the Special Collections. The librarian provided an excel spreadsheet of library holdings that suited our class and also assisted with assembling supplies for the commonplace book. In addition to Special Collections, we spent time in the Letterpress studio, practiced letterlocking techniques, made paper, cut quills, and sewed the commonplace books.

Our fundamental premise was "learning through doing" and thus we designed the course to model scribal and print networks.[SLIDE] We wanted students to "act out" the processes of creation and collaboration requisite to manuscript and print production. Assignments were scaffolded and completion of all projects was required for continuation. Students began with constructing a commonplace book and filling it with passages found from primary sources found online. We felt strongly about demonstrating the extent of primary sources that are available online. Digitized manuscripts from the Folger, the British Library, and the Free Library of Philadelphia formed the basis for many of the students' passages. After completing the commonplace book, student groups created print editions and digital editions of the commonplace books they themselves had created. Sarah Sprouse will shortly go into further detail on these assignments. However, based on their own experiences moving from scribe, to printer, to editor, students repeatedly voiced their surprise at how easily a text becomes altered from

its original, how the definition of authorship is shockingly loose in early periods, how decisions about book creation can be discriminatory, how labor intensive books are, and how necessary collaborative effort is in the material creation of books and edited projects.

Because of the constant collaborative efforts involved in completing assignments, the class really bonded. Students became much more open about sharing their work in general and we frequently did presentations of student work. This theme culminated in a multi-round debate among four student groups who respectively advocated for printers, scribes, nobles, and peasants. While a bit reductive, the exercise was easily one of the most memorable of the year and encapsulated the concerns of class difference, gender politics, religious and political ideology, textual transmission, and the logistics of material culture that our course endeavored to teach.

Overview of Assignments (SJS): Scaffolding

[SLIDE] At its core, the Commonplace Book Project is the creation of an actual manuscript. Students had to work with a variety of materials such as papyrus, calf-skin parchment, replica Renaissance paper, and local hand-made paper. We hoped that by creating a manuscript, that students would come to understand how manuscripts work. The first step in the project was to cut quills for writing. Each student had to use a quill and oak gall ink to contribute content to

their commonplace books. Once they had learned how to write with a quill, we were able to progress to the production of the commonplace books. [SLIDE] Students created gatherings of the different kinds of materials and then bound them between red oak boards with a Coptic stitch. [SLIDE] The next step was to then fill the book with passages from Middle English texts found in digital facsimiles online. This activity put students in the position of the medieval scribe. They chose their own exemplars and even illuminated some of the passages with colored inks and gold leaf. The final products were, in some cases messy, but on the whole beautiful little manuscripts.

[SLIDE] The next stage of the semester was a study of the basic principles of scholarly editing. In groups, students had to work with one of the commonplace books. They had access to a bibliography identifying the source for each passage, but they were not told how the passages had been modified or if there were copies of the same text in other manuscripts. It was the responsibility of the group to assess changes and errors in the commonplace book and then to decide how to best represent that information in their critical apparatus. We asked that the students also analyze the manuscript as an artifact. They were required to examine the illuminations, the scribal hand, the ruling, and rubrication. The groups prepared introductions that outlined their findings and established their editorial principles.

[SLIDE] The final step in this scaffolded set of assignments was the digital edition. Our students used the largely intuitive program DigitalMappa to prepare facsimile images and diplomatic transcriptions in the virtual space. Since our students spent all semester working with digital facsimiles and, in one particular case, a digital edition, we decided it would be appropriate to not only introduce students to digital humanities, but to also highlight the differences between a facsimile and an edition. [SLIDE] DigitalMappa provides a simple platform into which students can simply type up their transcriptions and link them to notes, a critical apparatus, and specific places on the page in the facsimile. Since digital editing was not the focus of the class, we did not delve into the realm of TEI and XML. The assignment was instead designed to expose students to the genre differences of digital editions, print editions, and digital facsimiles.

The commonplace book governed the organization of the major scaffolded assignments all semester, but it was necessary to incorporate other smaller tasks in service of this larger project. For example, we required our students to study Middle English in order to adequately transcribe materials from exemplars. For the first half of the semester, we gave daily transcription and translation exercises. After teaching basic transcription techniques, we assigned some lines from a text (usually from the Folger or the British Library). Students transcribed those lines by hand, and turned in their assignment. We graded those transcriptions pass/fail since

we felt that the value of the exercise lay in having "facetime" with a variety of manuscripts. While our students were upper-division English majors, none had been exposed to book history or the Middle English language, so it was necessary groundwork. There was also a required essay analyzing the movement from manuscript to print of the Book of Margery Kempe. [SLIDE] Students used the digital edition produced by scholars at Southeastern Louisiana University, which includes copies of the sole surviving manuscript and Wynken de Worde's pamphlet version of the text. [SLIDE] We provided students with a key to the passages in the pamphlet. [SLIDE] Working with Lynn Staley's Norton edition of the text, the students had to then find those passages in the manuscript. They had to discuss in their paper how the passages were represented in the manuscript – including rubrication, marginalia, and corrections. They were then required to articulate how the character of Margery changes in the pamphlet due to how the work was truncated and rearranged.

Lessons Learned (SBV)

In reflecting upon the course and what we would do differently in a future rendition, there are several avenues we would like to explore. Firstly, "less is more." In terms of removing material from the course, we would assign fewer readings. Having never taken a book history class ourselves or taken a non-science-based class with a lab component, we felt obligated to assign a reading for

almost every class day and created our own coursepack of articles gathered from books and journals.[SLIDE] Needless to say, there were many readings that we did not have the time to discuss. We realized that oftentimes the readings we assigned were more for our own benefit rather than for students. Spending more time on fewer readings would be fruitful in the future. Along those lines, activities take so much more time than one might realize – both in designing and in execution! Having a partner to help with logistical organization, set up, clean up, and in guiding students through the process is almost indispensable. This course took much more back-end foresight and planning than any other course we've taught. Starting a semester early and staying in close contact with the Special Collections personnel is helpful. Ironically, we might actually consider viewing fewer books during a Special Collections visit. Frequently, the librarian would select 15 or so books for students to view and discuss and experience in a single 50-minute class period.

As far as adding things to the course, we would like to experiment with including more primary source materials that discuss scribal and print cultures. Students responded well to the primary sources we did include, and more lively discussions ensued from those readings than from the scholarly essays. The concept of being an editor was complex for students to grasp and in the future we would spend more time parsing out editorial practices and editorial theory. More

in-class work on group assignments would assist with this issue. In fact, allotting more time for modeling assignments would have been helpful overall. At the same time we distributed assignment prompts, we also included a grading rubric. The rubric was helpful for students when assembling a multi-part assignment. Assignment prompts were often multi-page documents that required careful reading. It might be worth considering how to simplify the prompts – perhaps by moving them to an exclusively online format with an FAQ component and image examples.

In our personal experiences, teaching this class was at times exhausting due to the myriad material requirements and the constant backstage coordination. But it was, overall, the most rewarding course to teach. Student satisfaction and engagement were extremely high. Even students who did poorly on assignments and who were failing the course still came to class every day, participated, and were excited about the topic. On more than one occasion, students asked if we could go over class time. On student evals, students expressed that they wished there were more book history classes at our institution as well as at other universities and colleges. They felt that more students should have information on book history and have the experiences of making books. Unprompted, student frequently discussed their other literature courses in the context of book history

and stated that thinking about the materiality of a book helped them think about the contents of the book in different ways. And that was the whole point of the class.

Recommendations for acquiring materials (SJS)

In the case of the course we taught, we had access to funds from the university so we were able to provide the materials to our students. However, we acknowledge that this was certainly not the norm and now that I'm at work designing a similar course for the University of Alabama, I needed to rethink how the materials would be gathered and paid for. Working with the university's bookstore, I've been able to set up a packet of materials students will need for the production of a commonplace book. [SLIDE] While attempting to keep the cost to the student as low as possible, I was able to set up a packet that has all the necessary supplies for under $80 bucks. The total expenses to a student for the course, including books, is still less than $150 dollars. So this course design, even without university funds, is still accessible to most college students.

But purchasing the materials is simply one step. The next is the actual preparation of these materials. The time needed for prep was something Sarah and I had not actually thought much about prior to actually setting up the course. The paper and other writing supports need to be trimmed before they be folded into gatherings. If you include boards, they also need to be cut to size and holes have to be drilled into them. Students have to use an awl to puncture holes in their

gatherings. The actual binding process with the Coptic stitch is time-consuming and students need a lot of careful supervision to make sure the stitches are done correctly. If the paper has not been sized – which means chemically treating it so that it can be written on – then students have to do this too. Soaking the paper in a gelatin mixture does the trick for this, but it again does take time. As much as possible, we included students in the preparation of materials. I think it was a rewarding learning experience for students to be involved in each stage of the process.

Conclusion (SBV)

[SLIDE] In conclusion, the commonplace book assignment is a great pedagogical tool for departments with limited resources. Our book history course offered a pathway to learning about manuscripts despite our Special Collections library having so few real medieval manuscripts and early printed books. This course design gave students the opportunity to sit with numerous digital facsimiles while also learning about how manuscripts were produced. Designing such a course requires a lot of planning and early preparation, but that work is worth it to produce a hands-on learning environment. Looking forward, our syllabus would need to be revised for future iterations of the class, but its core structure would remain unchanged. We found that the class was such a unique experience for students that it was ultimately a good recruitment tool for the department. Students

walked away from the class with a beginner's knowledge of Middle English, codicology, paleography, book history, and scholarly editing, as well as with a nifty souvenir.