

When the Curioso Meets the Curator: Engaging Students Outside of the Classroom

Megan L. Toups, Trinity University

Author Note:

Megan L. Toups was formerly the Special Collections and Archives Librarian at Coates Library, Trinity University.

Correspondence concerning this article should be sent to:

Megan L. Toups
Contact: megtoups@gmail.com

Abstract

University special collections librarians and archivists have a primary mission to engage students with the material in our collections. For small liberal arts schools this engagement has traditionally happened in a classroom setting, mediated by faculty. In this paper, I advocate for an important *extracurricular* role for special collections and archives, a role that engages students at their locus of personal interest regardless of its curricular relevance. This new role helps to support our students' lifelong learning goals and helps fulfill the mission of liberal arts schools to foster self-directed learning. After reviewing current literature relevant to this issue, I present a case study of a recent collaboration between Trinity University's Special Collections and Archives and two Trinity freshman students to illustrate how this extracurricular role can impact student learning and the wider campus community. A discussion follows addressing issues of significance, scalability, and sustainability at both small and large institutions.

Keywords: special collections and archives, outreach, undergraduate students, extracurricular, curiosity, serendipity

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One of the primary roles of college and university special collections and archives is to support the teaching and learning activities of our campuses. Engaging students in a course related setting has traditionally fulfilled this function as, for example, when a professor brings her class to special collections for formal instruction on using primary source material for research. Not surprisingly, most of the literature on outreach to students in special collections and archives focuses on supporting these curricular goals. However, outreach to students should go beyond conducting instruction sessions for classes. It is important that we broaden the scope of our outreach to engage students with our special collections and archives when and where they care, *regardless of any curricular relevance*, in order to encourage lifelong learning skills. This is especially true for special collections and archives departments at liberal arts institutions where lifelong learning skills are considered an essential component of a successful education.

In order to do this we need to first reframe the way we think about our student users. We must treat our students first and foremost as people—*unique, multi-faceted individuals*—and eschew preconceived notions of what these “students” are looking for. They are not merely students; being a student is simply one of their many facets. We must gamble on their curiosity, find ways to connect them to new learning opportunities, and let them inspire us with new ideas for outreach. This is risky: we

invest time with no guarantee that a particular interaction will bear fruit, focusing on fuzzy notions such as curiosity, serendipity, inspiration, and luck. I propose, at least for the purposes of this article, that we call these curious students “curiosi” (sing. curioso), an archaic term for someone “curious in matters of science and art”. This term helps to distinguish two of the facets of these young people—the *curious person* from the *formal student*. Librarians and archivists excel at reaching the formal student through information literacy programs, but we can do more to reach the informal curiosi side of the young people on our campuses. The time has come for the student-teacher-librarian relationship to become more fluid, for students to direct their own learning by identifying material of interest to them, and for special collections librarians and university archivists to engage in a direct collaboration with students in ways that may or may not immediately involve their professors.

After a brief literature review I will present a case study highlighting how outreach to these curiosi worked in practice in Trinity University’s Special Collections and Archives and explore the potential for similar interactions at other schools.

Literature Review

Matthew C. Reynolds (2012) wrote in “Lay of the Land: The State of Bibliographic Instruction Efforts in ARL Special Collections Libraries” that “library literature is clear on the value of bibliographic instruction in libraries in general and, in the last 30 or so years, in special collections settings” (p. 14). Bibliographic instruction, oftentimes in the form of information literacy sessions, is an important part of our support of the curricular needs of our students. There is no shortage of innovative class design case studies in special collections and archives. Books on the subject include: *Past or Portal? Enhancing Undergraduate Learning through Special Collections and Archives* (Mitchell, Seiden, & Taraba, 2012) and *Using Primary Sources: Hands-On Instructional Exercises* (Bahde, Smedberg, & Taormina, 2014). In addition, the Society of American Archivists Reference, Access, and Outreach Section’s “Teaching with Primary Sources Bibliography” (2012) compiled citations to a number of relevant articles on this subject.

With this in mind, it is not surprising that the scholarship that addresses serendipity, curiosity, and inspiration in college and university special collections and archives is largely devoted to the role these phenomena play in courses. At the Library Orientation Exchange (LOEX) conference in 2014, Anne Jumonville and Dr. Kelly Carlisle described their efforts to inspire students’ writing for Dr. Carlisle’s Creative

Nonfiction Writing course by incorporating opportunities for serendipitous moments in Trinity's Special Collections and Archives (Jumonville & Carlisle, 2014). These efforts included opening a portion of Special Collections and Archives to student browsing for one class period. Amy Roberson, former Trinity University Special Collections Librarian and University Archivist, taught students how to handle the material properly and allowed them to take material down from the shelf. The experience gave the students an opportunity to find unexpected connections to the material and to weave their findings into writing assignments they completed later in the course.

David Pavelich, writing from the University of Chicago, has also used special collections to support creative writing classes. He noted that "such examples are always local, of course, and tied to the strengths of unique collections, so I offer them simply as models with the hope that fellow librarians will look at their own collections (physical and electronic) and ask, 'What are the possibilities?'" (Pavelich, 2010, p. 295). Such case studies serve to illustrate practical ways that university special collections and archives departments can engage with their students using materials in their own collections.

In addition to practical scholarship, as noted above, more theoretical scholarship has addressed the issues of curiosity and serendipity in special collections libraries and university archives. Martin Aurand (2011) wrote of viewing "the library as *Wunderkammer*, or a cabinet of curiosities, explored through the senses". He noted that this "is not a new idea, but one that is commonly lost in today's disembodied digital universe" (p. 12). The idea of special collections and archives as a cabinet of curiosities underscores the idea that students can encounter the material in our collections as sources of inspiration and creativity. Special collections and archives become places not just of scholarship, but of play. This contrasts with the strict research focus of information literacy and bibliographic instruction in our collections. Aurand acknowledged this strain, stating that "information literacy suggests that learning is about information seeking and directed research, and limits the role of the library to these ends. This is not so much wrong as incomplete" (p. 13). Special collections and archives contain a plethora of material, and therefore the connections to young curiosi are potentially quite varied—from sorority members looking at old scrapbooks to history students studying archival documents to artists perusing rare art books. These connections inherently reach beyond the classroom and do not fit neatly in the current approach to information literacy instruction.

In order to achieve these extracurricular connections, we must expand our efforts beyond the departmental faculty we are used to working and go

beyond the traditional way to reach the young people on our campuses. Over fifteen years ago Susan M. Allen made the case that faculty were “the key” to changing the perception of special collections from treasure rooms to humanities laboratories (Allen, 1999, p. 111). Since her article was published, many special collections libraries have begun ongoing collaborations with faculty who bring students in to use special collections. I believe we can now consider that students are also a crucial key to opening up special collections to a diversity of new uses. We have the ability to directly market services to students. In this way we can be not only humanities laboratories and treasure rooms, but also inspiration stations for the curiosi we encounter.

Practical barriers do, however, stand in the way of students’ access to the collections held in special collections and archives departments. How can a student be inspired by something they cannot see? Sidney Berger noted in his recent book, *Rare Books and Special Collections*, that “despite the superior access to collection information that we now have with online systems (which allow virtual browsing), the lack of direct access to books and manuscripts is still off-putting for many patrons” (Berger, 2014, p. 342). While there are important security and preservation reasons for having closed stacks, it is equally important to find ways to make our collections less “off-putting”, especially to those students on our campus who can truly be called curiosi.

The archival and higher education literature provides examples of ways to overcome this barrier to access. One practical example is an idea proposed by Bruce W. Dearstyne in his article, “Archival Reference and Outreach” (Dearstyne, 1997). Dearstyne noted that “in many programs, reference is regarded as a reactive function—the archivist responds to the people who happen to call, write, or visit”, but “historical records programs should regard reaching out to researchers as a substantial priority” (Dearstyne, 1997, p.189). He proposed that exhibits, publications, conferences and other avenues will fulfill this new proactive mission, and he drew attention to the “sea-change in information technology [that] may significantly redefine the relationship between archival repositories and researchers...further erod[ing] the already dissolving distinction between ‘reference’ and ‘outreach’ activities” (Dearstyne, 1997, p. 196). In fact, as will be seen later in this article, breaking down the reference/outreach distinction is vitally important to engaging our curiosi outside of the classroom.

Another practical example from the literature is focused on how our interactions with patrons change the depth of their engagement. Do we really listen to the needs of the curiosi that come into our special collections and archives? And are we overly focused on “serious”

researchers to the detriment of our curiosi? James M. Lang (2015) asked recently in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* if we are “handing out plates of knowledge without offering students a human connection”. While he was referring to his experience as a faculty member in the traditional classroom, university special collections librarians and archivists should pose the same question. Lang has challenged us to “think more about the ‘pedagogy of presence’ in higher education—about the value that comes from humans’ being present with one another in teaching and learning” (Lang 2015). Just as Martin Aurand suggested that information literacy is incomplete if it does not foster wonder and exploration, our attempts to create an environment of inspiration and discovery also will fall short if these attempts do not include being *present* in our interactions with curiosi. This includes not just physical availability at the reference desk, but also being intellectually and emotionally engaged as well. Lang noted, “personal relationships are what students document as the most profound and memorable aspects of their college experience” (Lang 2015). Special collections and archives should be providing these personal relationships as well. Living a pedagogy of presence is not an empty theoretical idea. While Lang admitted that it “can perhaps never be measured completely”, it is still one that “students view as essential” and that we can foster by listening to their needs.

The following case study highlights how being engaged deeply in a pedagogy of presence and being open to collaborations directly with students has the potential to offer fruitful creative learning experiences for both the young curiosi on our campuses and the librarians and faculty who mentor them.

Case Study

Every fall Trinity University’s freshman students come to the library in groups as part of New Student Orientation (NSO). They proceed from station to station throughout the library to learn about essential services—circulation, reference, the stacks, and so on. Special Collections and Archives is one of the many stations in the library, one that we have informally dubbed “the inspiration station”. As the students come by they see a display, learn about the services we offer them, and have the opportunity to ask questions. Typically, this is their first interaction with Trinity’s Special Collections and Archives. For those students who never return for a class, it may also be their last. It is important to engage these students as this may be the only opportunity to make a connection with them.

During the New Student Orientation in 2014, I was staffing our station. Two freshman students approached me separately with very specific questions about the collection holdings. Because I did not have an immediate answer for them, I gave each of them my business card and encouraged them to send an email, which they did. During the first week of class they returned to Special Collections and Archives together, asking if we had “old sheet music”. After I showed them how to search the catalog, they discovered several pieces of interest in the Tuesday Musical Club collection, a collection comprised of mostly musical scores donated by a local philanthropic organization of the same name founded in 1901 and dedicated to the promotion of music.

Of particular interest to these curiosi were three parts from George Frideric Handel’s *Overtures from All His Operas & Oratorios for Violins in Four Parts*, published by J. Walsh in the mid-1700s. Serendipitously, these curiosi had their instruments with them that day. As one of the students subsequently explained in a recent interview in Trinity University’s campus newspaper, the *Trinitonian*, “We went in, and we happened to have just finished practicing so we had our instruments with us, and she gave us the music. Since no one was around, we asked if we could play a bit and [Toups] told us to go ahead. It was really cool to play the music” (Gomes, 2015).

Not willing to let a golden opportunity for collaboration and further education slip away, I asked if they had any interest in performing a concert in Special Collections and Archives, to which they both replied



Courtesy of Megan Toups, Special Collections Librarian and University Archivist, Trinity University, San Antonio, Texas

in the affirmative. I proposed the idea to our library director, who then approached the music department chair, Dr. David Heller. All parties were intrigued in the idea of a concert in Special Collections and Archives.

These two curiosi returned to Special Collections and Archives at least seven times to either work with the music, get help finding music resources, or to study. Their dedication to studying the music inspired me to suggest that they consider not only performing a concert in Special Collections and Archives, but to also approach the music faculty about getting course credit for their work. They enlisted the support of Dr. Heller and were able to revive a class that had not been offered in over ten years (D. Heller, personal communication, February 2015). The class, Collegium Musicum (MUSE 1196), is “a performance course in music of all eras. Early musical instruments will be used when possible and investigations into the performance practices of the time will be undertaken. Open to all students by audition” (Music Course, n.d.). The two freshman students, along with three other students, enrolled in spring 2015 in the semester-long class. They practiced as an ensemble accompanied on harpsichord by the professor for the course, Dr. Heller.

The end result of this course was a final performance held on the last day of spring classes, May 1, 2015, in Special Collections and Archives. The ensemble played for nearly an hour, with an intermission during which the audience was given the opportunity to question the two curiosi about the process of developing the concert and class. The concert was a resounding success—for the students, the music department, and the library. Twenty-five people came for the event, including members



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of the music faculty. After witnessing what the students could do in collaboration with Special Collections and Archives, faculty from the music department have approached the library about doing similar collaborations with Special Collections and Archives the future. For example, one faculty member who was at the concert contacted us about using the space for a summer concert by music educators on campus. We were able to host this concert in June 2015.

In addition to providing the space and inspiration for the concert, Special Collections and Archives supported the student work in this course by digitizing portions of the *Operas & Oratorios* for their use in rehearsal and performance; creating a display of the music of Special Collections and Archives mounted to coincide with the concert; and producing promotional material for the event, including posters and programs. While the two freshmen curiosi and their incredible enthusiasm have been at the heart of the entire endeavor, Special Collections and Archives served an important role in supporting them in their personal interest in music. This was made possible by our willingness to engage with the students directly, being open and present in our interactions with them.

DISCUSSION

Significance

While the freshman in our case study managed to revive a course and performed a concert in Special Collections and Archives, it all started with two curiosi's personal search for "old sheet music". By being open to supporting them in this personal capacity, Special Collections and Archives inadvertently contributed to the revival of a formal course, the Collegium Musicum. By engaging in what Lang called a "pedagogy of presence", we found an area of direct collaboration with these curiosi. For those who doubt the usefulness of such personal and serendipitous outreach to the lifelong learning of our student patrons and the campus at large, perhaps this case study will serve as an example of the possibilities that exist. In the future, with other students, who knows where their interest might take them? These events show that *we never know how far a student might run with their interest in special collections and archives once their curiosity has been kindled.*

Another unexpected result was the length these students were willing to go to help us promote our collections to other students and to the

campus at large. As one of the freshman noted in his interview with the *Trinitonian*, “Special Collections is, in my opinion, tragically underused... It’s a really, really cool resource. I mean the music that we are playing was published in 1750, and it’s the original text” (Gomes, 2015). Their enthusiasm and willingness to work with Special Collections and Archives helped us to promote to campus the idea of using our space for other cultural events. One of the curiosi wrote to me of his experience, “Working with the Special Collections was a fantastic experience. Though Special Collections is not usually the first place that comes to mind when you think of ‘concert’, I believe that it should be utilized by everyone on campus as a place for study, for congregating, for displaying art and performing music...It is like a private oasis in the library...we were happy to be able to perform in Special Collections, for the benefit of Special Collections. And, we would gladly do it again.” (J. Cohen, personal communication, June 2015). Clearly this was truly a collaboration in which both the students and Special Collections were enriched.

Scalability

The small size of our institution did make the direct collaboration with students much easier than it might be at a larger institution. Trinity University is a small liberal arts school with a total undergraduate student population of under 2,500. The staff of our Special Collections and Archives consists of one full-time librarian/archivist and a few part-time employees, including student workers. This means that, as the Special Collections Librarian and University Archivist, I am often in direct contact with undergraduates in our reading room when staffing the reference desk. However, similar interactions and activities are possible at larger institutions as well.

At a large institution, special collections librarians and university archivists might enlist their student workers in reaching out to patrons, friends, and classmates about what would most interest them, and then develop formal programming events based on the feedback. Another idea would be to conduct a contest in which student teams compete to have their favorite topics turned into exhibits and have these students (now curiosi) directly work with special collections to mount the exhibit. This could be a collaboration with any number of departments on campus where curiosi are given course credit for their collaboration with special collections and archives. No matter the size of the institution, the important thing is that the curiosi on our campuses are heard and their interests are being supported by our special collections and archives departments.

Sustainability

Nevertheless, one can legitimately ask how we can engage in these direct collaborations with students when we are already juggling other duties such as teaching classes, answering reference questions, and processing incoming acquisitions. A simple first step is to implement “proactive reference”. Proactive reference is a term we coined to describe a hybrid of reference and outreach that actively solicits reference questions from patrons who stumble upon special collections and archives departments. Dearstyne’s prediction that advances in technology would dissolve the barrier between reference and outreach has come true (Dearstyne, 1997, p. 196). Rather than waiting passively for reference questions to come in, we can now actively solicit questions from patrons who happen across our reading room or our staff.

For example, at Trinity University’s Special Collections and Archives patrons must sign in to the rare book reading room whether they have come for research, for a class, or simply to study. When they are signing in, we engage in proactive reference by encouraging them to note their email address and any topics they are interested in. Next, we search the catalog for pertinent material and check for any archival holdings that might be useful to their topic. Finally, we send them an email that includes 1) the catalog and archival information requested, 2) a short video tutorial on how to search the catalog for special collections material, and 3) a link to our online Libguide that states our hours and other relevant information. Many students use our reading room for study. By encouraging them to reveal their individual interests, we are able to offer tailored reference/outreach that opens our “invisible” collections to them. Since implementing this service in September 2014, many students, faculty, and outside researchers have noted areas of interest they would like to be contacted about. A professor has even brought his class to Special Collections and Archives as a direct result of this service. This simple step—instituting “proactive reference”—takes very little time to implement and carry out. It can be undertaken in almost any special collections and archives setting regardless of size. It can also be implemented at the reference desk and anywhere there are exhibits displayed. After instituting this basic step, any special collections and archives unit can slowly increase their extracurricular student outreach as time, staff, and resources allow.

Conclusion

On every campus there are intensely curious students. In order to serve these highly motivated young people, we need to improve our services and

change our attitudes towards their “extracurricular” interests. Of course, special collections and archives should continue to support curricular needs, but the most engaged curiosi will also have personal educational goals that surpass what is supported formally within the curriculum. Special collections departments are a gold mine for the right curiosi. Our job, as curators of these collections, is to help these curiosi to deepen their engagement with whatever subject they are interested in, whether it is for a class paper, a debate project, or a personal interest. Unlike departmental faculty who are focused on a particular subject, we are uniquely situated to help these students deepen their appreciation for any subject they fancy, whenever we have something related to that subject in our collection. By lowering the barrier of access to our collections, we help foster a love of learning in these bright curiosi.

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