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Pedagogical Uses of Special Collections Materials
(Special Collections in Theological Education: Strategies for Integration panel)
by
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Introduction
In this presentation, I highlight seven ways that special collections materials can be used for teaching and learning. I will illustrate each of these uses with an example taken from the special collections at Princeton, and then mention a strategy that we have used to promote such pedagogical uses of our materials.

These uses and strategies are by no means exhaustive of how rare and unique materials can be used pedagogically. They are, rather, meant to provide a sense of the possibilities for the curricular integration of special collections materials.

What Are Special Collections Materials?
Before I begin, I would like to say a couple of things about terminology.

First, a few words about the concept of “special collections.” In the late nineteenth century, “special collections” was used to describe special subject collections, most of which were in private or public libraries or archives. In the early twentieth century, academic libraries began organizing rare book rooms and collecting unpublished source materials. By the latter half of the twentieth century, the concept of “special collections” had been broadened to include a diversity of rare and unique materials, in various formats, that had historical value. At Princeton Seminary, the department of Special Collections curates cuneiform tablets, manuscripts, rare books, personal papers, institutional archives, and museum objects. And now we are faced with curating the records of the digital age.

It is this broader sense of the term “special collections” that I am using here, and which should make my remarks broadly applicable. Not every institution has a rare book collection; but every institution has—or should have—an archives, as well as other historic materials that are important for that institution’s history, mission, and identity.

Second, I would like to emphasize the word “materials” in my title. Librarians are not only concerned with texts but also with their incarnations—the word that has become papyrus,
parchment, paper, or digit. We learn much from texts; but we can also learn much from books and other physical objects.

**Some Pedagogical Uses**

1. First, and most basically, special collections materials can be used to illustrate historical ideas or events.

   **Figure 1:** This is a page from an early printed German Bible, which was printed in Lübeck in 1494. The text is in the common language of the region, and the engravings use common images from that place and time. In this engraving, from the book of Genesis, Jacob’s dream of a ladder to heaven is set right outside the city of . . . Lübeck!

   **Strategy 1:** New students at Princeton Seminary are given a tour of the library, which includes a stop in the Special Collections department. For this tour, we set out some of our

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Figure 2: Receipt for Money-Taxes, P.Oxy. 1138 (left), Revelation 3:19b-4:2, P.Oxy 1080 (top right), Christian Amulet, P.Oxy 1152 (bottom right)
“treasures” to give students a sense of the materials to which they have access. We like to display this book to illustrate how the Bible has been made accessible in particular places and times.

2. Special collections include historic documents that people in the past created and read. Giving students access to such raw texts enables them to work with documents that have not been transformed through editing, consolidation, printing, or reformatting.

**Figure 2:** Some interesting historic documents that we have are a number of papyrus and parchment fragments that were found in the town dump of Oxyrhynchus, Egypt. These are interesting just to look at. Notice the different hands that created these different types of documents: the first, a receipt, is a business record; the second, from the book of Revelation, is a literary text; the third, an amulet, is a personal record or artifact.

**Strategy 2:** These documents have always been popular for class exhibits, so we created a digital collection of them for our digital library ([http://scdc.library.ptsem.edu](http://scdc.library.ptsem.edu)). They are now used in translation and transcription exercises in Greek classes.

3. Special collections materials can be used to show the physical materials, technical processes, and scholarly methods that have been used for the transmission of texts over time.

**Strategy 3:** A number of materials, processes, and methods have been used over the centuries to transmit and determine the Greek text of the Bible. I used this topic to create an exhibition that was closely connected with our curriculum. All of our students study the Bible, and most of them study biblical Greek. I wanted to create an exhibition that would augment what they learned about the history of Greek Bibles in their courses. The exhibition I created, entitled “The Transmission of the Greek Text of the Bible,” included biblical Greek papyri, biblical Greek codices, early printed Greek New Testaments, and early critical editions of the Greek New Testament. This exhibition was a huge success: three different professors had me take more than one hundred students through it. There is now a virtual version of it online.²

4. Special collections materials can be used to show how the production and dissemination of texts is a collective process.

**Figure 3:** This is the title page from the first edition of Jonathan Edwards’s *A Faithful Narrative*, which had an important part in the transatlantic revivals of the mid-eighteenth century.
century. You can see here many of the people involved in publishing this little book. Edwards, a minister in Northampton, Massachusetts, communicated an account of a local revival to Benjamin Colman, a prominent minister in Boston. Colman corresponded about it with two prominent English ministers, Isaac Watts and John Guyse, who asked for an account that they could publish. They wrote an introduction to Edwards's text and delivered it to John Oswald, who printed it in London. Then it was assembled and sold to the public.

You can follow this communication network through to reception, if a book has marks of ownership or readers' marginalia. Unfortunately, we don't know much about the provenance of this particular book, and this copy is rather clean. (Sometimes librarians do like to find their books marked.)

**Strategy 4:** When we present materials to classes, we exhibit materials from a librarian's point of view, pointing out such things as title page details, marks of ownership, and readers' responses.

5. Special collections materials can be used to demonstrate the significance of paratexts, which frame a text and influence readers' encounters with it.

**Figure 4:** The text of this Vulgate Bible comes with extensive notes. The biblical text—the larger type in the center of the page—is surrounded on all sides by one gloss and accompanied by a second, interlinear gloss. You can see here how various words or phrases in the biblical text are treated in the notes, and understand why better translations that broke these authoritative verbal links, such as Erasmus's, caused some excitement.

**Strategy 5:** In addition to exhibiting materials from a librarian's point of view, we often suggest materials for class exhibits. We have introduced the book above into class presentations to show the interpretive role of biblical paratexts.

6. Special collections materials can help us understand the present in the context of what has happened in the past. For example, as denizens of the digital age, we are all of us trying to understand how current technological changes will transform our culture. The materials that may be found in special collections can help us learn from similar technological turning points in history.
Figure 5: Leaf from a Manuscript Bible, ca. 1310 (left); leaf from a Gutenberg Bible, ca. 1450 (right)

Figure 5: Compare these two leaves: the one on the right is from a Gutenberg Bible, the first major book printed with movable metal type (ca. 1450); the one on the left is from a Paris manuscript Bible (ca. 1310). You can see how early printed books were made to resemble manuscript books. Communication revolutions or media shifts are not always as radical—initially—as they could be. We see this today with electronic journals, especially when an electronic journal is just a PDF copy of the print edition.

Strategy 6: Small exhibits can be created around topics such as this. In addition to providing information about the topic, these exhibits present an opportunity to highlight the types of resources that are available for further exploration.

7. Finally, perhaps the most important use of special collections materials has to do with the discovery of new information and untold stories in unpublished sources.

I recently learned about an interesting relationship between the English author Charles Williams (1886–1945) and the American clergyman Walter Lowrie (1868–1959). Williams is principally remembered today as a member of the Inklings, the Oxford literary group that
included C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien. While reading a biography of Williams, I learned that he had been involved with publishing the works of Søren Kierkegaard in English. I knew that Walter Lowrie, a Princetonian, had been one of the earliest English translators of Kierkegaard, and I soon found my way to a series of folders in Lowrie's personal papers labeled "Oxford University Press." These were full of letters from Williams that revealed the significant role that he had had as a publisher in bringing Kierkegaard to an English audience—a role that is documented nowhere else, not even in the archives of OUP. One historian of the press claimed that Williams left no record as a publisher. Part of that record has now been found.

**Strategy 7:** During reference interviews, information literacy sessions, or other personal contacts with students (the most captive audience I have is made up of my student assistants), we try to give students a sense of the variety of resources in special collections that are—or might be—related to their research inquiries and interests.

**Conclusion**

I hope that this brief overview has given you a sense of some of the possible pedagogical uses for the rare and unique materials that are kept in your library. In addition, I hope that it has sparked some ideas of how you might bring such materials to the attention of faculty and students at your institution.

**Endnotes**

2. Available at http://library.ptsem.edu/collections/exhibits/greekbible.
3. The "Ordinary Gloss," attributed to Walafrid Strabo (d. 849).
4. Attributed to Anselm of Laon (d. 1117).
5. In Matthew 3:2, John the Baptist says, "Metanoiete." The Vulgate rendered this as "Poenitentiam agite," do penance; Erasmus translated this as "Resipiscite," change your mind.
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