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**The Book History Master’s Degree: A Case Study**

A dedicated master’s degree provides distinctive opportunities for teaching book history. It allows a broader curriculum than would be possible in a single course at the undergraduate or graduate level, giving instructors more latitude to introduce a range of theoretical discussions and historical examples. Its capstone project, the master’s dissertation, provides scope for students to produce a substantial piece of independent work, without requiring the specialized focus or contribution to knowledge expected of a doctoral dissertation. In this essay, I will suggest that the book history master’s degree requires a distinctive pedagogical approach, which overlaps with but differs from best practice in undergraduate classrooms and graduate research.

As a case study, I will use the master’s degree in Book History and Material Culture at the University of Edinburgh, UK, which I directed from 2014 to 2021. This degree is a twelve-month program (or twenty-four months part-time), structured into two semesters. In each semester, students take a core course and an option course, each taught through weekly two-hour seminars, plus some training in research methods. Over the summer, students write a dissertation of 15,000 words on a topic of their choosing under the supervision of a faculty member. In 2016, this degree was the first book history masters to receive accreditation from the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP), recognizing the importance of training in book history for future library professionals, especially those hoping to work with rare books. While some of our pedagogical practice is specific to our context, I also offer recommendations that others may apply in their own circumstances.

A master’s degree in book history can attract students from a variety of academic and professional backgrounds, who aspire to a range of careers. Applicants include students who majored in their first degree in English, history, modern languages, classics and other subjects, as well as those who have experience of paid or voluntary work in libraries, archives, museums, publishing, bookselling, and the heritage sector. Students returning to academic study after a period of work may wish to study part-time while continuing to work and may have support (including sometimes financial support) from their employers. We routinely recruit students internationally, from North and South America, Asia and Continental Europe, as well as the UK. Some students arrive with clear career objectives, while others are still considering their options. The most common aspirations among students entering the program are to work in libraries, in particular with rare books and special collections, and to continue to doctoral study (these two ambitions need not be mutually exclusive). We also sometimes admit older students taking the degree in retirement for personal interest. Our students, then, are coming from different places and heading in different directions. We aim to meet them where they are and help them get to where they want to go.

This context produces important differences from teaching book history at undergraduate level. Undergraduate courses may be situated in a major concentration or degree program in an established discipline such as literature or history, and so must serve the needs of students in those programs while working within a broader curriculum. A dedicated master’s degree in book history, by contrast, can embrace the interdisciplinary nature of the field and resist being tied to the curriculum of any one discipline. It can also blend academic concerns with elements of professional training that equip students for careers within and beyond the academy.

In order to do this, we take a skills-based approach. Much foundational research in book history has taken the form of large-scale national histories of the book, often published in multiple volumes, as well as studies focused on the book history of specific historical periods. These projects have been essential to establishing the field, but they do not offer a helpful model for teaching book history at graduate level. Rather than offering a chronological overview (especially one focused on a particular national context), with classes on “the medieval book,” “the book in the Renaissance,” “the Enlightenment and the book” and so on (which might be more appropriate in a discipline-specific undergraduate class), the first-semester core course “Cultures of the Book” is structured around a set of ideas, debates, and skills. Students develop key competencies such as object handling, bibliographical description, and writing collation statements. They cultivate their ability to decipher what Jerome McGann has called “the bibliographic code,” learning how to pay attention to the historical evidence that can be gleaned from bindings, typography, and signs of use (McGann 77). In some cases, we supplement classroom instruction with videos made for the course and accessible online. These cover topics including “Handling Collections Materials,” “The Anatomy of a Book,” “Bibliographic Format,” “Writing Collation Statements,” “Bindings,” and “Watermarks.”

Students learn about controversies in the field, grounding these in the historical periods from which they emerge, but always paying attention to the debate’s theoretical implications. For example, we discuss the disagreement between Elizabeth Eisenstein and Adrian Johns over how to characterize the historical emergence of print not primarily as a debate about early-modern history, but as an example of how to conceptualize technological innovation and media change in any period of book history. Where appropriate, we illustrate our theoretical discussions with examples from different centuries. In a class exploring how the material form of the book can enhance or obscure its linguistic content, we discuss both how Samuel Richardson arranged for the “mad papers” in *Clarissa* to be printed with lines of type askew on the page to represent Clarissa’s deranged handwriting and how B. S. Johnson arranged for his novel, *The Unfortunates*,to be printed on cards that could be shuffled and read at random, deranging the codex format. In this way, students whose primary interests lie in different historical periods learn together and explore shared theoretical concerns.

This approach reconceives the purpose of an introductory course in book history at this level. It is not understood as conveying a cargo of historical knowledge to students, but rather as providing them with an intellectual toolkit they can use when developing their own interests and projects within the field. As students begin to formulate their own ideas for essays (and, in due course, for the dissertation), they can draw on the theoretical understandings they develop in this course, as well as the practical skills they gain, bringing these to bear on topics and materials of their own choosing. We encourage students to develop essays on the historical or geographical contexts that most interest them and support them in doing so both through informal consultation and formative feedback on an abstract of their proposed essay. The only proviso is that essays must be focused on the material form of the book—its production, circulation, or reception—broadly understood.

At any level, book history should be taught with books in the room. Some of the most sophisticated theoretical reflections in the field have emerged from encounters between scholars and particular books, and so it is appropriate for theoretical concepts to be taught through specific examples. This does not mean, however, that the subject can only be taught in institutions with extensive special collections. Teaching book history should not be only for those with well-endowed research libraries. Below, I will suggest some strategies for working with more limited collections or for assembling a teaching collection to support this kind of course.

We aim to bring several items from the university collections into every class. This requires working closely with librarians at every stage, from planning the syllabus to preparing to teach each class. Identifying suitable books to use can be a challenge because library catalogues do not typically list the kind of physical features that are often the focus of our attention. If you want a book where the pages have been bound in the wrong order, or one where the spine has fallen off revealing how the gatherings were stitched together, or one that contains a cancelled leaf, or one with a dated watermark that’s clearly visible, or one with several different ownership inscriptions, then it may be difficult to find these through the library catalogue’s user interface. Rare books and special collections librarians, however, can often locate such items, making collaboration essential.

We want students not just to look at the books, but also to handle them. Touch is an important sense for book historians to train. In some cases, books may be robust enough to withstand such handling every time the course is taught, or the library may be able to offer duplicate copies or copies purchased for handling purposes. In others, it will be necessary to identify alternatives so that students only handle an item every two or three years. Sometimes, it may be appropriate for the instructor to handle a book, but not the students. Again, input from librarians at every stage is essential, and librarians must be committed to the use of collections for teaching. Actively reviewing the materials handled in class each year, in consultation with librarians, also allows the syllabus to evolve as we find (and in some cases acquire) more pertinent books to bring into the classroom. Cataloguers who are aware of the curriculum can also suggest suitable material for inclusion.

To facilitate handling, the number of students in the class must be small enough for everyone to gather around a book. This is a major advantage for classes at the master’s level, which tend to be smaller than undergraduate classes. A document camera can be used when working with larger groups, but students respond best if they can get close to the books, and handling is essential when examining watermarks or chain lines in paper, for example, or distinguishing hair side and skin side in parchment. To enable this, the classroom should be secure and suitably equipped with book cushions or cradles and snake weights. The University of Edinburgh is fortunate to have high-quality teaching space in the University Library, where special collections materials can be used with groups of students, as well as a print studio at Edinburgh College of Art, where students learn about typesetting and printing on the hand press.

Where it is harder to bring groups of students into direct contact with rare books, it may be necessary to develop strategies for teaching elements of the degree online. As other contributors to this volume explore in more detail, this is likely to involve a combination of bespoke digitization, video conferencing, and use of existing digital resources for both synchronous and asynchronous activities. While this provides obvious challenges for teaching, it also prompts us to consider new approaches, for example by drawing more extensively on material from a wider range of institutions in class.

In institutions without a dedicated teaching collection, it may be possible to identify a corpus of suitable teaching materials among the existing collections. Where the book history master’s is likely to run over a number of years, faculty may be able to liaise with librarians to acquire suitable materials to expand this collection. This is also a two-way process: by suggesting items for use in class, librarians can help refine the syllabus. Having identified suitable items for use in teaching, it can be helpful to produce a hand list of this material. We use a shared spreadsheet, which enables faculty and library staff to manage a high volume of class examples. This should exist in two versions: one that can be used by faculty and staff to prepare and deliver the classes, including notes on store locations and lesson plans, and another version for circulation to students, stripped of sensitive information and supplemented with fuller interpretive commentary, which will allow them to revisit particular items for further research outside of class.

In institutions fortunate enough to have world-class collections, some real treasures can be brought into the classroom. But you don’t need treasures, or even very extensive collections, to teach book history in a hands-on fashion. Book history is not an elitist field: just as an archaeologist can learn as much from a charred fragment of a cooking pot as from a priceless piece of jewelry, so a book historian can investigate a tattered, stab-stitched penny dreadful or an airport paperback with the same enthusiasm and profit as a gleaming book of hours. When a colleague taught Dinah Mulock Craik’s 1856 novel *John Halifax, Gentleman*, she invited her class to buy used copies of the book. The novel was a favorite among Victorian parents and teachers looking for gifts or prizes for children, and so it appeared in many cheap editions, which now retail online for a few dollars. The students spent less money than they would have buying a modern edition, and the class was able to discuss how the multiple material forms in which it appeared had shaped the book’s reception. With this kind of approach, book history can be taught at the master’s level without extensive collections or specialized teaching space.

In the second semester core course, “Working with Collections,” we shift our attention from individual books to collections of books. Here, we focus on how to manage and develop collections, using as examples collections of different sizes, ages, rarity, and monetary value. We draw on contributions from librarians, archivists, conservators, curators, and digitization professionals. In seminars led by a variety of colleagues with relevant expertise, students learn about how library professionals approach building a collection. They discuss how to manage metadata and cataloguing requirements and how to maximize discoverability. They hear about how to assess a collection’s conservation and preservation needs and the kinds of interventions that may be recommended. And they consider how to make a collection accessible to users both in the reading room and through digitization projects and exhibitions.

Much of the teaching in this course is best approached through practical exercises that engage students in active learning. For example, a seminar on digitization introduces students to principles of digitization via both academic readings (such as Miller) and professional guides to best practice (such as Youngs). Students visit the library’s digital imaging suite to see the equipment used, the workflow followed, and the best practice when handling different kinds of material. They then undertake a practical exercise in which they are guided through the process of planning a digitization project for a collection. Another practical exercise comes at the end of the semester, when we visit a local antiquarian book fair. Equipped with the University Library’s acquisitions policy and notes on areas of particular interest, students consider the items offered for sale and make recommendations for acquisitions. These activities benefit from the resources of the University and the local community, but with minor changes they could be implemented elsewhere, using the extensive information about library policies and collections available online.

We don’t aim to provide complete vocational training or to make students into fully qualified professionals. While we include training in metadata and cataloguing, for example, we do not expect students to become proficient users of any particular cataloguing software. Rather, we introduce students to the principles that will guide their continuing professional development after graduation. As with the first-semester core course, the emphasis is on developing an intellectual toolkit for thinking critically about books. So practical experience of cataloguing is less important than fostering critical thinking about the history and politics of catalogues and cataloguing (Olson). The ideas encountered in the book history master’s degree will therefore be important both for students who become library and information professionals and for those who go on to doctoral study or other careers.

When assessing this part of the degree, we ask students to produce a professional report on a particular collection, of the sort that could be submitted to a senior manager in a library, archive, or other heritage organization, in order to support strategic decision-making about priorities for projects and resource allocation. The report should succinctly set out the chosen collection’s nature and significance, its current physical condition, accessibility, and metadata. It concludes with recommendations for action where improvements are needed and suggestions for developing the collection. Students can write on any discrete collection, in any institution; some choose collections held in the University Library, some look to other local institutions, and others draw on experience in institutions elsewhere.

As one of their option courses, students can undertake a work placement, which provides them with 70 hours of work in a professional environment. We work with local libraries and related institutions, which host students to work on projects that explore and develop their collections. Students often help to enhance existing finding aids or develop new ones. The work placement allows students to put their skills into practice in a professional environment and to gain confidence in handling collections materials—experiences that are useful for a variety of career paths. Students deliver a poster presentation about their placement and write an essay inspired by it. In some cases, these essays develop from research into the collections the student has been working with; in others, they treat professional issues that have arisen in their placements.

Providing a work placement option can be demanding because it requires the course organizer to develop and maintain a network of professional contacts in relevant institutions. The University of Edinburgh is fortunate to have a cluster of such institutions on its doorstep. However, suitable placements can also be identified on campus in the library or archive, and students can be involved in finding suitable placements where appropriate. Our policy of bringing books to the students is thus matched by a complementary one of sending students to the books.

A book history master’s degree offers opportunities for faculty, library staff, and students to work together, exploring the subject at an advanced level in a way that combines theoretically sophisticated academic debate with insights from information professionals and an awareness of practical applications. Teaching at this level allows students to handle a range of books and to learn through practical exercises. A skills-based pedagogical approach equips students with the theoretical tools they can use in research projects on a variety of topics across a broad historical range. Students leave the degree equally well prepared for doctoral research or for careers across the information and heritage sector.

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