



PRESERVATION EDUCATION CURRICULUM



NORTHEAST
DOCUMENT
CONSERVATION
CENTER

CLASS 2 LESSON PLAN

Context for the Cultural Record

The Lesson

Part I: The Importance of Context (1 hour)

“There is no product of the past that is not useful in studying the past.” —G. Thomas Tanselle

A. Historical and bibliographic identification

1. Descriptive bibliography
2. Context of production

B. Prominent areas of scholarly research

1. History of publishing
2. History of reading
3. Contextual criticism
4. Interactive art productions

In-Class Activities

- Belanger discusses the roles of the typefounder, the papermaker, the printer, the publisher, and the binder, the writer, and the reader: “All need to be accounted for if the complete history of a book is to be known and described.” Select a few current publications (hardback, paperback, academic, trade) and have the class discuss the aspects of type, paper, binding, book design, writing style, and intended audience, applying, where appropriate, principles of bibliographic analysis.
- Have the class brainstorm about the meaning of “context” in relation to audiovisual and digital materials, particularly “born-digital” productions.
- Have the class discuss Oram’s contention that the move away from traditional literary studies will lead to an upsurge in “contextual,” thematic, and period studies. It has been over ten years since Oram wrote his article. What is the evidence that these types of collections have been used more?

Part II: Physical Aspects of Context (1 hour)

“The purpose that a book would serve, the occasion for which it was produced, its anticipated audience, the use for which it was intended and to a lesser degree its content, could all influence the way in which it was bound and decorated.”

—Mirjam M. Foot

A. Structures of cultural records: materials

1. Manuscripts (parchment, paper): Bound
 - a. Historic
 - b. Modern
2. Manuscripts (parchment, paper): Unbound
 - a. Historic
 - b. Modern
3. Print: Bound
 - a. Western (Europe and the United States)
 - i. Materials (e.g., wood, parchment, leather, paper, metal)
 - ii. Styles (e.g., Medieval, Renaissance, Victorian, Art Nouveau; publishers', edition, and artists' bindings)
 - b. Other (Oriental)
 - i. Materials (e.g., silk, paper, palm leaf)
 - ii. Styles (e.g., "Japanese," slatted)
4. Print: Unbound
 - a. Ephemera
 - b. Maps
 - c. Broadsides
5. Nonprint: audiovisual, electronic

In-Class Activities

- From the Web exhibition "Victorian Bookbinding: Innovation and Extravagance, 1820–1910," choose the "Publishers' bindings and series" section. Have the class discuss the relevance of binding styles and series to publications of today.
- Divide the class into small groups and have each select three examples of historical bindings from the Princeton Web site. Compare each to the explanations and drawings in Frost's article and then discuss the important aspects of structure, including design and materials.

Part III: Preservation of Context (1 hour)

"Preservation must be approached not only as a set of technical solutions to technical problems but also as a more complex concept that includes social dimensions." —Michèle Valerie Cloonan

A. Discussion of conservation options and their relation to context

1. Reconstructive vs. minimalist
2. Invasive vs. benign
3. Restoration
4. Sympathetic
5. Reformatting
6. Refreshing, migrating, emulating

B. Discussion of handling and study

1. Relationship between conservator and curator (access and exhibits)
2. Importance of user education

In-Class Activities

- Both Cloonan and Stewart see conservation activities from the larger perspective of the intellectual use of the collections. Use of special materials, however, often involves risk of damage. In broad terms, a curator seeks to have collections shown and used, whereas a conservator seeks to have them protected and preserved. Who makes the final decision? Divide the class into two teams, one taking the role of the curator, the other the role of the conservator. Have them present a *joint* “final report” on the proper (and ethical) treatment of cultural artifacts.
- Have the class brainstorm on the possible effects of conservation treatments on the “cultural context” of artifacts.

Suggested Graded Assignments

The Importance of Context

- Tanselle states: “There is no way that reproductions—regardless of what technology is developed in the future—can ever be the equal of originals as documentary evidence, for there is no way of getting around the fact that they are one step (at least) removed from those originals.” Have students discuss—perhaps in a discussion board venue—the implications for documents of cultural importance produced only in digital form. What is the “original” of such a document?
- In McCorison’s article, Cathy Davidson recounts her experiences with the novel *Charlotte, a Tale of Truth* (known as *Charlotte Temple*). Each copy she examined “contained its own story about authorship, readership, and publishing in America.” Choose a couple of modern examples and have the students consider how electronic publishing (e.g., e-books) affects this type of contextual study.

Physical Aspects of Context

- A good assignment would be to compare the three Web sites in their presentation of historical bindings. What does each site emphasize? How might each be used as a resource in the study of cultural context? As a resource for the study of format and structure?

Preservation of Context

- Divide the class into four groups and assign each group *one* of the following. Allow opportunities for them to discuss and prepare their reports (perhaps in an online venue).
 1. Draw up a basic model plan for the selection and treatment of special collections materials for exhibition.
 2. Draw basic guidelines for digitization of special collections materials.
 3. Draw up guidelines for a scholar’s use of fragile 19th-century ephemera, especially dime novels and pulp fiction.
 4. Write an ad for a new conservator position. Draw up a list of duties and treatments.

Suggested Term Projects

- Contact staff at a nearby library’s special collections. Ask them to select ten to fifteen books that represent a range of conditions. Have students choose five books that are candidates for conservation attention. Students are to study the interesting or significant features of each book, as well as the conservation concerns for each, and summarize them in a term paper. Also have students research the estimated value of each book using both auction catalogues as well as online sources (e.g., Addall, Abebooks).