CLASS 2 LESSON PLAN

Context for the Cultural Record

Resources for the Teacher

The Importance of Context


This article is one of the very best and most approachable introductions to the field of analytic bibliography. This term encompasses historical, descriptive, and textual bibliography and concerns the "whole study of the physical book." Director of the Rare Book School at the University of Virginia, Belanger is at the forefront of bibliographic scholarship today.


This is a brief statement from the President and Librarian of the American Antiquarian Society on the importance of retaining "physical evidence": “But the object itself consists of cultural evidence, exhibiting as much about the traditions of the period and place in which it was produced, and, in some instances, the object is of greater moment than its content.” It recounts scholar Cathy Davidson’s visit in 1984 when she gazed in awe at the collection of diverse copies of Charlotte Temple, “each one embodying/reflecting/creating its own history of the book in American culture.”


Lengthy and detailed, this is a seminal document in the discussion of the importance of intellectual “context” and the care and maintenance of library collections. It uses its considerable authority to establish the crucial importance of the artifactual value of primary resources in all formats.


Oram advocates the positive effect of the shift away from scholarly emphasis on canonical literature and traditional exegesis: “On the other hand, it could be argued that thematic and wide-ranging collections centered on a historical or literary period will receive more attention and be of more value to the investigators of the future, for these collections contain precisely the resources which scholars will turn to for contextual studies of literature.”

A thorough study detailing the problems arising from using surrogates in place of the original object. Although Tanselle's analysis is not recent enough to include the digital world, it lays the intellectual foundation for consideration of all “reproduction.” His cautionary statements about the unreliability of photocopies and facsimiles apply even more broadly to the lack of “fixity” with digital surrogates. “The essential fact that one must come back to is that every reproduction is a new document, with characteristics of its own, and no artifact can be a substitute for another artifact.”


This excellent overview of the emergence of the field of “book history” discusses many aspects of its scholarly purview, describes the work of several important scholars, and presents a basic bibliography.

For Further Study


One of the most important modern studies to analyze the historical relationship between printing and culture, its sociological emphasis laid the foundation for contextual scholarship. “[The printed book] rendered vital service to research by immediately transmitting results from one researcher to another; and speedily, without laborious effort or unsupportable costs, it assembled permanently the works of the most sublime creative spirits in all fields.”

Physical Aspects of Context


A very good Web site at the British Library, detailing the design and production of publishers’ bindings during the 19th century. It covers both binding styles and book production.


This is a good, concise introduction to the study of the relationship of bindings to culture by one of the most eloquent scholars of the field. Such aspects as style, design, cost, materials, and readership are discussed in relation to the “context” of publishing: “[The bindings’] condition can hint at whether they were meant for study or for show, as a source of knowledge or of aesthetic joy, as furniture or as treasured possessions to be displayed with pride, as a manifestation of personal vanity or a secret obsession.”


Perhaps the best short introduction to the history of book structures, giving explanations and
examples from the third to the 20th century. The discussion is helped immeasurably by Frost’s clear illustrations.

http://libweb5.princeton.edu/visual_materials/hb/hb.html

Very possibly the best Web site on the history of binding, this discusses the design and structure of bindings from the Middle Ages to the present. Good attention is paid to the relationship between book and audience.


This significant collection of over 4,000 decorative bindings in the University of Alabama’s and University of Wisconsin’s collections provides images and essays that place the history of book-binding within a historical context. The project also provides an excellent list of resources, including a “Glossary of Publishers’ Bindings-Related Terms” and a “Master Bibliography of Print and Online Resources.”


For Further Study


A learned yet lucid account of the design and production of manuscripts from the medieval period leading up to the invention of printing. It discusses text, illumination, materials, production, and physical format.


Tanselle is a highly respected bibliographic scholar who represents one important, but extreme, view of the value of original documents. This short paper presents his belief that “every ‘copy’ of every printed edition” is unique as an artifact and should thus be preserved for study of the past. It also develops his theory that language is intangible and thus the only “reality” is the physical format itself. In other words, there is no distinction between form and content, something that goes against most library preservation programs today that distinguish between conserving the “artifact” (i.e., the physical embodiment) and “preserving” the content (i.e., the text and images) in any appropriate medium.
Preservation of Context


Cloonan’s article offers a refreshingly candid look at the current trends in preservation programs, which, because of the emerging problems of electronic formats, emphasize only technical aspects and solutions. “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.” Cloonan thus establishes a wider “context” for preservation decisions and activities.


These sections offer practical applications based on the intellectual inquiries in the sections discussing the importance of context and artifactual value.


Stewart discusses both the broad perspective of the intellectual preservation of the cultural artifact and the role of the conservator in making decisions and carrying out treatment plans. It is thus a good combination of the theoretical and the practical. “[The conservator and the curator] each has the obligation to ensure the object survives for as long as possible and with as little alteration as possible.”

For Further Study


This article establishes the history of the book as one of the most influential contexts for preservation of special materials, especially popular culture publications. It discusses the problems for conservators trying to treat this type of historical publication and establishes methods for teaching readers how to handle this fragile material.