

Embedding unique and distinctive collections into the curriculum

Experiences at Maynooth University Library



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Introduction

Unique and distinctive collections (UDCs) provide library and information professionals with new and exciting opportunities to engage with library users through dynamic hands-on information literacy (IL) sessions using materials such as manuscripts, early printed books, archives and artefacts. This approach to IL instruction is particularly useful in an academic library environment as it enables library practitioners to integrate this material fully into the wider academic curriculum, thereby contributing to the strategic aims of the institution and furthering the development of information-literate graduates. At Maynooth University Library we are actively involved in the integration of UDCs into the curriculum through a multidisciplinary approach that involves the delivery of IL sessions in controlled reading rooms in the library coupled with sessions in classrooms and lecture halls around the university. This approach aims to exploit this material and embed it in the curriculum while also facilitating various learning styles, particularly in terms of active learning. This article will provide an overview of IL activities using UDCs at Maynooth University Library. It will outline the practicalities involved as well as the benefits of this approach to IL in order to assist practitioners working in this area.

Benefits

Librarians, archivists and museum professionals are increasingly aware of the benefits of integrating UDCs into the wider academic curriculum and harnessing the unique aspects of this material. Hubbard and Lotts (2013) suggest that information literacy practitioners can use this material to engage with students through 'hands-on experience, and the act of leaving the classroom to visit a new space'.¹ Fuhler, Farris and Nelson (2006) advocate the use of artefacts as teaching tools in order to provide an 'invitation to learning that will not easily be forgotten'.² Integrating special collections material into library workshops can also encourage active learning. According to Roberts and Taormina (2013): 'When the goal of a course-specific library workshop is to bring the research process alive, the instruction cannot be a simple lecture.'³ Bahde (2014) notes that primary source instruction enables the development of transferable skills which include critical thinking skills, teamwork and communication.⁴

Special Collections at Maynooth University Library

Special Collections & Archives (SC&A) at Maynooth University Library consists of two reading rooms – one in the historic Russell Library, which was designed by British architect and designer Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin and completed in 1861, and the other in the recently extended John Paul II Library, which features a state-of-the-art environmentally controlled storage area. Together they house over 37,000 pre-1850 printed works, 55 items of incunabula (early printing), approximately 300 Gaelic manuscripts, and over 50,000 archival documents, dating from approximately 3,500 BC to the present day. IL instruction in SC&A is characterised by hands-on sessions that facilitate the development of research skills relating to handling, preservation, consultation and citation.

Information literacy instruction

Krause (2010) suggests that librarians and archivists working in the area of special collections are typically involved in facilitating access to information, delivering course-based instruction, developing lesson plans and providing orientation.⁵ Sessions at MU Library typically consist of a general introduction to SC&A, along with information on locating and consulting primary and secondary sources, and an outline of proper handling techniques. Sessions are tailored for each group and suitable material is identified prior to each visit.

This approach has been used in the delivery of IL sessions to undergraduate and postgraduate students across various disciplines such as education,

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Experiences at Maynooth University Library

mathematics, history and modern languages. IL using UDCs can take various forms including:

- targeted 'one-off' sessions delivered to students enrolled on a particular module
- multiple sessions delivered during a particular module, usually through engagement and collaboration with key academics
- accredited modules delivered by the library in collaboration with academic departments
- one-to-one sessions with staff and students

Practicalities

Instruction is typically delivered in a library setting, which affords a controlled environment for the protection and preservation of UDCs. However, at MU Library we have developed a transportable teaching kit featuring various examples and tools relevant to historic and rare collections. This includes the following objects:

Woodblocks

Woodblocks were important tools for illustration and decoration during the hand-press printing period during which an image or design was carved into a block of wood (typically 5 x 7 inches) and used for printmaking purposes. The teaching kit includes several examples of finished and unfinished woodblocks, including several that were used to print illustrations in an early twentieth-century book. Students are given an opportunity to handle these woodblocks and to look at printed examples of woodcuts in books from the handpress printing period.

Copper engravings

The introduction of copper engravings enabled printers to include detailed illustrations in printed works. The engravings were made through a process of incising an image or design into a copper plate and covering the plate with ink, resulting in an accumulation of ink in the recessed areas; this was then transferred to the paper during printing. The kit includes a copper engraving mounted on a wooden block that was used for a book printed in the year 1912. Students are given an opportunity to handle the engraving and to compare it with woodblocks and steel engravings.

Steel engravings

Steel engravings were much more robust than copper engravings and allowed for finer detail. The teaching kit contains one example of a steel engraving.

Metal type

The technology of printing remained virtually unchanged from the invention of Gutenberg's printing press in the 1450s until the mechanization of printing in the nineteenth century. A sheet of solid metal type is included in the kit, which enables students to handle and inspect the raised type.

Handmade paper

Paper produced during the hand-press printing period was predominantly handmade and produced using chopped linen rags. A wire mould was dipped into this solution of pulped rags, which resulted in an impression of wire lines and chain lines on the finished paper. These lines can typically be seen when handmade paper is held up to the light. A single sheet of handmade paper printed in the year 1683 is included in the teaching kit.

Machine-made paper

The advent of machine-made paper in the nineteenth century greatly revolutionised the paper-making industry. Paper produced during this period

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Embedding unique and distinctive collections into the curriculum Experiences at Maynooth University Library

was typically made from wood pulp (as opposed to linen rags), which makes it highly acidic and more prone to deterioration. A printed pamphlet from 1861 is included in the kit and students are asked to identify the differences between handmade and machine-made paper.

Vellum

Vellum (calf-skin) was used both as a writing surface and as a binding material in the production of the codex. Several fragments are included in the kit and students are asked to identify the different characteristics of paper and vellum.

Teaching with UDCs – Examples

At MU Library we work with a number of academics in various departments across the university in order to deliver engaging and dynamic sessions using UDCs. Modules that we work with include:

HY330: Maps in history

Students on this third-year module are given a session in the Russell Library, which traces cartographic history using early printed materials from the collection, including Peter Apian's *Cosmographia* (1584), Herman Moll's *The compleat geographer* (1723) and Daniel Beaufort's *Memoir of a map of Ireland* (1792). This session contributes to the development of critical thinking skills, particularly those associated with the identification, evaluation and analysis of sources. It is delivered in a dynamic environment that takes students out of the classroom and gives them an opportunity to engage with historical materials. It also contributes to a broader understanding of cartographic history by focusing on the variety of sources and formats available for consultation.

MT382A: History of mathematics

Undergraduate students enrolled on this module learn about the history of mathematics from the Babylonian period to the early nineteenth century using material from historical collections including: Diophantus's *Arithmetica* (1670), Copernicus's *On the revolutions of the celestial spheres* (1566) and Sturmy's *Mariners magazine* (1669). Students learn how to navigate resources in various formats in order to meet their information needs. This session successfully embeds primary and secondary historical materials into the curriculum and facilitates active learning through a practical, dynamic approach to teaching delivery.

ID004: Cultural Heritage and the Irish Literary Tradition

This five-credit module is delivered by the Centre for Irish Cultural Heritage in collaboration with the library. It is aimed at international students and involves integrated and interdisciplinary lectures, a hands-on manuscript writing workshop, supervised access to Gaelic manuscripts and a questionnaire-based assignment. The class provides an opportunity for students to cement their learning through dynamic hands-on experience. It facilitates the development of transferable skills through a multi-disciplined approach to teaching delivery. The practical manuscript-writing demonstration encourages active learning through dynamic engagement, and the questionnaire-based assignment provides opportunities for reflective learning. Questions featured in the assignment include the following:

- What were your general impressions of the Russell Library?
- What kind of collections are housed there?
- What manuscript did you look at?
- What kind of access did you have to it?
- Did you find any evidence of conservation repairs?
- Was the text written on paper or parchment?

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SG618: Introduction to Palaeography

This session is delivered to postgraduate students and focuses on the Gaelic manuscript tradition using examples of manuscripts from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries. It looks at sourcing manuscripts using print and electronic catalogues and outlines appropriate handling techniques.

Conclusion

At MU Library we have seen a marked increase in requests for IL sessions with UDCs over the last five years. This is perhaps due to a growing awareness of the value of primary sources as tools to enhance research skills, and an appreciation of the dynamic hands-on teaching sessions facilitated by these collections. A key feature of this approach is an increase in undergraduate instruction, which equips students with the necessary skills to identify and access primary sources before they undertake a major research project in their academic careers. By working with academics to deliver classes (and in some instances entire modules), we now offer a dynamic learning experience which is in keeping with the overall strategic aims of the university.

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