Introducing SHARP in the Classroom

Remember when you were first learning how to teach? Or when you thought you knew how to teach but were assigned a course in a subject you were barely familiar with? Knowing about how printed books were circulated in early America doesn’t directly transfer to knowing how news crossed the continent in the 19th century, let alone knowing how to effectively convey that information. And even if—or maybe especially if—you’ve been teaching for decades, learning new ways to engage students is necessary to succeed in the classroom.

Even though all teachers struggle with finding a pedagogical style that is true to them and effective, we often feel like we are the only ones going through that struggle. It’s not always easy to find places to talk about pedagogy and to share our experiences. While there are journals dedicated to theories of pedagogy and book series on approaches to teaching texts, it can still be difficult to find syllabuses and exercises to use in the classroom. When I first started teaching early modern book history, I was lucky to be working at the Folger Shakespeare Library and to have the resources of the Folger Institute to draw on. My syllabus was conceived in response to that Institute repository, and it made my and my students’ classroom experiences stronger for being able to build off of other people’s work. Without those resources, figuring out how to effectively teach book history would have been much harder.

The networks we draw from situate our own research perspectives and pedagogical practices. Just as book historians consider circuits of communication in understanding how texts operate, so should we think about the webs of influence that shape our teaching. The syllabus as a written document is one place that we can acknowledge our influences. Because I was so indebted to the courses Lyn Tribble and Heidi Brayman had taught, I cited them on my syllabus, just as I would credit scholars I draw from in my research. It’s a nice thing to do, but it also helps students and fellow teachers position my thinking about teaching book history within a larger field. One of the places that this web of influence plays out in recent years is twitter, an ephemeral social network where teachers often share their thoughts and struggles as they work through creating courses and celebrations when they evaluate their students’ work. But twitter doesn’t work easily as a record of practice and interaction. How many of us have a vague recollection of having seen something useful but then can’t find our way back to the original tweet to credit it?
Part of being in a network is not only referencing it, but making your own contributions to it. And so I tried to pay it forward by publicly posting my course syllabus and assignments so that others might be able to build their own classes from it. (I no longer teach that course, but I left the website up and I deposited my syllabus in the Humanities Commons CORE repository.) It can feel a bit strange, sometimes, to treat your teaching products with the same sort of practice as your research products. Is a syllabus really worth a DOI? But perhaps if we situate our teaching in terms of information exchanges, we will start to feel more comfortable inviting others into our classrooms, whether in person or through sharing our work online.

SHARP is made up of book historians and the aim of the society is to support the work of book history. While much of the work of SHARP focuses on the process and products of our research, most of our members also teach, whether as full-time faculty, contingent instructors, librarians, or as public scholars. And so SHARP in the Classroom is our place to build a public network for teaching in our field, a place where we can contribute, acknowledge, and record the work that we do in classrooms.

The first premise of SHARP in the Classroom is that we all need a space where we can share—on equal footing—resources for teaching book history, whether those be syllabi, assignments, or discussing our experiences in the classroom. The second premise of SHARP in the Classroom is that doing the work of teaching is scholarly work and sharing that work counts as scholarly publication. To both those ends, Classroom provides a place for sharing peer-reviewed teaching resources with the book history community writ large. And, as with SHARP News, everything published in Classroom is under a Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial Share-Alike license—in plain language, everything we publish here, you will be able to reuse as long as it’s for non-commercial purposes, you credit the creator, and you share anything you create from these resources under equivalent terms.

There are a few different categories of writing that Classroom publishes. The primary category is that of pedagogical tools—syllabi, assignments, in-class exercises. In this first issue we have contributions from Jesse Erickson on studying and making scrapbooks, Raven Johnston on online resources, and Leah Price and Whitney Trettien with two different syllabi
covering the long history of textual media. *Classroom* is also a place where we can reflect on our teaching practices, and along these lines, we have a contribution from Emily Spunaugle and Megan Peiser on “pandemic pedagogy” and their use of lo-fi videos to teach material objects. Most of what is in this debut issue of *SHARP in the Classroom* is, not surprisingly, about teaching in these weird times and that struggle we face in wanting to teaching materiality without having library resources at hand. I think you’ll find some great ideas from our contributors. And I’m using this issue’s open discussion forum to encourage more conversation about how we are teaching when we’re caught between in-person and distant education, or for you to raise any other teaching issues that are on your mind.

Future issues will also include resource reviews—reviews of the pedagogical value of textbooks, online resources, anything that is designed for or can be used in teaching—and contributions from students about their classroom experiences, as well, of course, more pedagogical tools and reflections on teaching practices. More details about what we’re looking for can be found in the submission guidelines, and I hope that you will think about what you want to contribute to this network.

*SHARP in the Classroom* will be publishing twice a year, in January and August. If you have work you’re ready to submit, you can do so through the submission form. We’re also looking for volunteers to draw on as peer reviewers; if you’re interested, please add your name to our list of readers. If you have any questions or suggestions about *Classroom*, feel free to contact me at sharpclassroom@sharpweb.com or leave a comment on this post.

One advantage of a digital publication is that we have minimal space limitations. I am eager to see as many of your pedagogical tools and reflections published in *SHARP in the Classroom* as possible so that we can become a hub for teaching book history and a network of pedagogical inquiry. Because after all, if we don’t grow our teaching practices, we won’t be able to draw in future book historians. I look forward to learning from your collective insights and explorations!