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Teaching and Learning Los Angeles through Engagement with UCLA Library Special Collections

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Abstract

This article presents a case study of how library services and special collections, in particular, can be integrated into undergraduate education by engaging strategically with a high-impact area of the curriculum and concentrating on courses related thematically to collection strengths. The goals of such engagement include enhancing student academic success and increasing the visibility and use of library services and collections. During the academic year 2012-2013, the UCLA Library's Teaching and Learning Services and Library Special Collections partnered with the Division of Undergraduate Education's Freshman Cluster Program to experiment with embedding librarians into instructional teams in order to improve students' research skills. In "Los Angeles: The Cluster," a year-long, interdisciplinary course focused on the history, architecture, and culture of Los Angeles, librarians collaborated with faculty and graduate student teaching assistants to incorporate primary sources, especially rare and unique cultural heritage materials, into the undergraduate curriculum. In this article, Kelly Miller provides an overview of the library's partnership with the Freshman Cluster Program, and Robert Montoya describes his experience as an embedded librarian in the LA Cluster.

Keywords: undergraduate research; first-year library instruction; special collections and undergraduate learning; archives and education

Introduction

Over the past decade, the idea that special collections and archives are relevant to undergraduate education has begun to be embraced by librarians, archivists, teaching faculty, and graduate students. Recent publications have started to document and explore examples of curricular engagement with special collections and archives in higher education, ranging from liberal arts colleges to major research universities. For instance, in 2012, the Association of College & Research Libraries published an edited volume, entitled *Past or Portal? Enhancing Undergraduate Learning through Special Collections and Archives*, that included nearly fifty case studies of undergraduate use of special collections and archives. Also in 2012, an entire issue of *Archive Journal* was devoted to an exploration of the theme, "Undergraduates in the Archives," from the perspectives of librarians, archivists, faculty, and even students themselves.

The UCLA Library's new Teaching and Learning Services (TLS) initiative, established in the fall of 2011, is experimenting actively with the use of special collections in undergraduate education as part of its mission to increase library support for undergraduate learning and research. Thanks, in part, to the "Collecting Los Angeles" initiative, which has expanded the Library's ability to acquire special collections reflecting the diverse history and culture of the city, the UCLA Library is now especially well positioned to integrate cultural heritage materials relating to Los Angeles into undergraduate education (Setzer, 2009). In coordination with Library Special Collections and the Digital Library, TLS is striving to answer the following questions: How might increased access to cultural heritage materials affect the educational experience of UCLA's undergraduate students, who are living in the global metropolis of Los Angeles? How, in turn, might student engagement with the city's history, built environment, and diverse communities through the prism of special collections and archives challenge the UCLA Library itself to adapt and change?

In alignment with the mission of UCLA's Division of Undergraduate Education, TLS aims to support the whole 21st-century student, who must learn not only to find and analyze reliable information, but also to communicate effectively, problem solve, work in teams, use digital tools, and engage in multicultural communities. One of the Library's partners in this endeavor is the College of Letters and Science's Freshman Cluster Program:

a curricular initiative that is designed to strengthen the intellectual skills of first year students, introduce them to faculty research work, and expose them to such "best practices" in teaching as seminars and interdisciplinary study. Clusters are year-long, collaboratively taught, interdisciplinary courses that are focused on a topic of timely importance such as the "global environment,"

or "interracial dynamics." These courses are taught by some of the university's most distinguished faculty and seasoned graduate students and are open only to entering freshmen. During the fall and winter quarters, students attend lecture courses and small discussion sections and/or labs. In the spring quarter, these same students enroll in one of a number of satellite seminars dealing with topics related to the cluster theme. (*Freshman Cluster Program*)

In any given year, ten to twelve clusters are offered, and each provides students with credit for more than a third of their general education requirements, as well as a writing requirement. Because each cluster can accommodate up to 200 students, the program as a whole enrolls 38-40% of the first year student population. Librarians have typically been involved with the program as reference librarians, providing information literacy instruction and online resource guides for courses, as needed. During the 2012-2013 academic year, librarians began embedding in select clusters, in order to experiment with new ways to engage first year students with library collections and services and improve their research skills. Now, not only are librarians leading library instruction sessions, but they are also attending and participating in lectures and discussion sessions, consulting with faculty and students on the use of primary sources in research and writing projects, and developing and teaching satellite seminar courses in the spring quarter.

"Los Angeles: The Cluster" was one of the selected clusters in which librarians were embedded. Team-taught by three UCLA faculty members, professors Janice Reiff (History), Dell Upton (Architectural History), and Alicia Gaspar De Alba (Chicano Studies) and a cohort of five graduate student teaching assistants, this cluster facilitated student engagement with the historical and cultural "layers" of Los Angeles, providing an "in-depth look at the city in which UCLA is located" (GE Cluster 66A). Students were asked "to investigate and analyze the urban area that [would] be their home for the next several years," thus, coming to better understand the peoples, spaces, politics, and cultures of Los Angeles and its metropolitan region (GE Cluster 66A).

In addition to attending lectures and discussion sections and viewing films, students were asked to ride the public bus along Sunset Boulevard, take guided walking tours of the city, and participate in other experiential activities; in doing so, they became aware of the ways that people, culture, institutions, and technologies have shaped the city over time. The students then conducted library research projects that informed the production of a collaboratively-authored course textbook, *Seeing Sunset: Learning Los Angeles*, which includes digitized photographs, maps, and ephemera. The online resource is currently available through a course website on a campus course management system. The UCLA Digital Library will soon serve as open-access publisher of this text, providing public access to the resource that features rare and unique special collections and archival materials.

In the following sections of the article, Robert Montoya describes—in his own voice—his experience as an embedded librarian, working to integrate cultural heritage materials into the LA Cluster.

Embedding as a Librarian in “Los Angeles: The Cluster”

The experience of engaging with “Los Angeles: The Cluster” as an embedded librarian was invigorating, because it opened up many possibilities; but the process was also challenging, requiring deep immersion with the course content and awareness of the pedagogical aims of each professor involved. I found that I needed to be flexible, creative, and willing to act quickly on ideas in order to succeed. The 10-week quarter system at UCLA is fast-paced, so in order to effectively integrate library sources into the curriculum, it was necessary to implement new ideas on a near daily basis.

Janice Reiff, the lead instructor, created the vision for the cluster’s interdisciplinary examination of the city. The first quarter lecture course was taught by an historian (Reiff) and an architectural historian (Upton); the second quarter, which shifted the focus to literary and cultural Los Angeles, was taught by a cultural studies scholar (Gaspar de Alba). Each instructor brought a different perspective and methodology to the class. For instance, a goal set forth by Professor Alicia De Alba in the second quarter was to guide the students through the process of finding their “I” voice in relation to Los Angeles. She emphasized that each student had the potential to be an active participant within the jurisdiction of the city and, thus, could positively affect the development of Los Angeles.

My goal as an embedded librarian was to help students gain research skills by integrating library resources into the curriculum and helping students discover that special collections libraries and archives are not just dusty rooms, reserved only for advanced researchers working independently. I wanted to communicate to students that special collections and archives—as part of their own university, their own city—belong to them, too. I wanted to encourage them to interact with primary sources, allowing them to re-shape their conceptions of the city, its history, and its inhabitants. Finally, I wanted to inspire students to imagine the library as a collaborative space, an active-learning laboratory.

As an embedded librarian, I attended most of the lectures for the course, which helped me develop familiarity with the intellectual content of the course and the professors’ own styles and approaches to the material. It also helped me appreciate the experience and perspectives of the students themselves. I read the same material the students did, watched the same movies, and attended a weekend walking tour of the city with the students, immersing myself as both a student and librarian within the course. Admittedly, Los Angeles history has always been an

interest of mine, and having formerly worked as the Assistant Director for the Historical Society of Southern California, many of the assigned readings, themes, and topics, were at least somewhat familiar to me already. The context provided by lectures, readings, and activities, was, nonetheless, important to me, because they informed my decisions regarding which primary sources were appropriate for class use. The shared experience also helped create a common connection between me and the students, which facilitated inspiring and productive conversations.

Fall and Winter Quarters: Integrating Special Collections into Lectures and Discussion Sections

I decided to take a tiered approach to integrating special collections and archives into the cluster curriculum—offering hands-on experience with special collections for a select number of students, class visits with discussion sections, and online outreach to the larger lecture—as a means to reach the greatest number of students in some way. I formed an especially productive collaboration with Nico Kenji Machida, a teaching assistant and Art History graduate student, who was leading two of the lecture discussion sections. My work with Nico and his students continued throughout the year, which allowed me to take a deeper approach to primary sources each successive quarter. Early in the fall quarter, I met with Nico to identify what his pedagogical goals were and determine how my engagement with the students could help facilitate these goals. These discussions proved critical to structuring my engagement with the students and guiding their use of primary source material.

Each discussion section, led by a teaching assistant, was charged with examining a different community along Sunset Boulevard. At the end of the quarter, each discussion section was expected to make a presentation on their research findings about their assigned community in Los Angeles to the entire lecture of approximately 170 students. That presentation was intimidating enough to the students—I did not want primary source research to add to their anxieties. Demystifying the “experience” of Special Collections was the overarching goal; it was essential that special collections be accessible not only in idea, but also in action, so that perceived boundaries for entry into the archive be erased.

Due to the size of each of Nico’s class sections (20 students), we decided that two or three designated students from each section would work with me individually in special collections to augment the visual portions of their presentations. These students became special collections ambassadors or advocates for the rest of their class. The main Library Special Collections (LSC) reading room is relatively small, so managing the number of students at any given time is a practical and necessary step to consider. When the students arrived, their excitement and interest in the collections was readily apparent, as well as their willingness to invest the necessary time in research. I provided them with introductions to accessing and using special collections and archives, both in the reading room and online. The resulting final

presentations, in which the students proudly featured primary sources from special collections, demonstrated that the partnership with the Library was influencing the way students were conceptualizing the history of Los Angeles.

Having already provided the students with a basic introduction to using special collections, I was able to go a step further in the second quarter, increasing the students' interaction with primary sources. In collaboration with Nico, we devised a series of questions for the students as a pre-assignment to visiting special collections. The goal of this assignment was to help acquaint and guide the students through the various online resources, including the website of the Online Archive of California (OAC), which "provides free public access to detailed descriptions of primary resource collections maintained by more than 200 contributing institutions including ... collections maintained by the 10 University of California (UC) campuses" (Online Archive of California). Nico wanted to make sure that the context of documents was apparent—he wanted the creators of the primary sources to be the main subject of class discussion. Asking the students to complete a pre-assignment was extremely helpful; by the time I met with the class, the students had already experimented with using the OAC, and so I was able to focus our session on answering their resulting questions. In essence, because of the pre-assignment, the class became a special collections laboratory for them.

During the second quarter, the students were asked to discover their "I" voice in relation to Los Angeles and locate themselves in the historical landscape of the city. For their final assignment, they were required to write a letter to a public official about an issue of social or cultural concern in the city that was personally or intellectually relevant to them. I wanted to show the students that there is a precedent for this type of individual participation in politics and local issues and that active engagement with governmental, political, cultural, and grassroots entities is one of their essential rights as inhabitants of Los Angeles. To this end, I sifted through special collections and archives and located examples of just such engagement with civic life: letters written by ordinary individuals to public officials about what was happening within the city. With the assistance of library colleagues, I chose two collections in particular: the historical records of the Los Angeles Unified School District Board of Education (which contained letters for and against the diversification of teachers in minority areas in the 1960s) and the papers of Edward Ross Roybal, a member of the Los Angeles City Council who opposed the eviction of minority families from Chavez Ravine for the building of Dodger Stadium (which contained letters from individual community members). Upon seeing these letters, the students' interest was immediately piqued, and they began piecing together the stories of the historical correspondence, one letter at a time. The experience of engaging with these letters also inspired the students to think about how one letter, one folder, one box, one collection, and one library, might all represent different aspects of the larger story of Los Angeles.

Students were broken-up into groups of three or four and each group was assigned one folder of primary sources to examine closely. Nico explained to the students how particular letters from the archives were or were not effective in achieving their goals—an exercise that provided students with better strategies for persuasively arguing their own points. We created questions to help guide the students as they assessed the content of the letters:

- What is the historical context of the documents? What places, people and historical events appear to play a central role in this context?
- How do these documents make a case for action? What writing strategies did you find particularly effective within them? What types of information included in the letters seemed especially important to the issue at hand?
- What information is missing in these documents that might have made for a more compelling argument?
- In what ways are the issues presented in these documents relevant to present-day Los Angeles? Do they propose a call to action that you see as related to your own advocacy letter?
- What type of larger research projects might be developed using these primary sources?

The letters that the students eventually wrote and mailed were addressed to the Mayor, Councilmen, Board of Commissioners, and Vice Provost. The topics raised in the students' letters included the following:

- increased oversight of certification for court interpreters,
- the potential economic impact of a proposed Wal-Mart in Chinatown,
- a proposal for a UCLA undergraduate "think-tank" aimed at creating sustainable community ties, and
- a proposal to redirect transportation funding towards development of rapid bus lines as opposed to light rail construction.

The students' letters compellingly reflected their own hopes for change in their local communities in Los Angeles.

The two discussion sections Nico led included only 40 of the students within the larger class of 170 students. One method I devised to reach the other students in the cluster was to write and publish a weekly "newsletter" via the course website

that connected that week's lecture and reading content with relevant sources that I selected from special collections. For example, in response to lectures on food disparities in Los Angeles, I posted two items from the papers of Clifford E. Clinton, a restaurateur and political activist, who advocated for the reduction of hunger in Los Angeles in the first half of the twentieth century. The items I posted in the newsletter included a short biography of Clinton that I drew from the finding aid, scans of a letter Clinton wrote about his initiatives, and an advertisement for one of his projects. I also composed a brief statement about how these materials added to the value of the lecture and readings. In this way, I was able to illustrate how special collections and archives can enrich our understanding of the social history of urban areas.

Spring Quarter: Integrating Special Collections into Seminars

Finally, I want to briefly describe the cluster seminars—each limited to 20 students—that provided opportunities for even deeper student engagement with special collections and archives. Professors Reiff and Upton invited me to be part of the instructional team for a seminar entitled, “Rewriting Sunset,” whose goal was the revision and expansion of the course textbook, *Seeing Sunset: Learning Los Angeles*. During the seminar, we worked with the students to expand the textbook and prepare it for migration from the course website to the UCLA Digital Library. In the next offering of the Cluster (2014-2015), the textbook will exist as an open access online resource.

My role in this seminar was to help students conduct research using special collections, guiding them from start to finish. More specifically, I assisted them with establishing research questions and facilitated the finding of primary source materials related to select neighborhoods in Los Angeles featured in the textbook. The students produced research projects that bolstered particular themes in the textbook that were of interest to them. These topics included homelessness in Los Angeles, the evolution of ethnic markets in West Hollywood, historic restaurant menus, and ethnographic explorations of public places. The seminar, thus, provided students with the opportunity to encounter rare and unique primary source materials, to contextualize those sources within the broader course content, and contribute to the creation of a textbook, interpreting the city for future readers. By involving students in the expansion of the textbook, the instructional team was able to incorporate the students' own research contributions and perspectives into the fabric of the course itself, thus, transforming the very shape of the curriculum.

In addition to working with the “Rewriting Sunset” seminar, I co-taught with Kelly Miller another seminar for the cluster, entitled, “Mapping Literary Los Angeles.” In this seminar, students researched, analyzed, and interpreted a large-scale literary map of Los Angeles, *A Lyrical Map of the Concept of Los Angeles*, acquired by the UCLA Library in 2012. Created in 2011 by contemporary artist, J. Michael Walker, the map depicts—in word and image—dozens of writers associated with Los Angeles.

The papers of nine of these writers, including Ray Bradbury, John Fante, Aldous Huxley, and Anaïs Nin, are held in UCLA Library Special Collections. Students had the unprecedented opportunity to engage with this original artwork, meet the artist himself, conduct research using primary sources from special collections, and prepare an interpretive exhibit about the map.

Each of the seventeen students in “Mapping Literary Los Angeles” conducted research on a cultural figure, landmark, or other item depicted on the map by using library catalogs, databases, and other tools to identify relevant primary and secondary sources. In addition to helping students become more familiar with library catalogs, databases, and circulating collections, we also introduced the students to special collections. At first, we facilitated in-class encounters with selected primary materials from relevant special collections, such as the Raymond Chandler Papers—during a session that focused on mystery and crime writers in Los Angeles literary history; next, we consulted one-on-one with students, guiding them on the path to independent use of relevant special collections. In order to assist students in preparing annotations for their sources, we created a template of detailed questions that a student could ask themselves about each source; these questions helped students cultivate the critical and analytical skills necessary to conduct a successful research project. The students also learned how to use the free digital research tool, Zotero, to collect, organize, cite, and share their research sources with their classmates.

Over a period of seven weeks, the students developed their individual research projects, delivered an oral presentation to the class, and submitted a written report that included a draft exhibit label for their topic on the map. In the final weeks of the class, the students worked in small groups to synthesize their research discoveries around the map’s themes, creating collaboratively authored commentary. The students’ research—exemplified in their exhibit labels and commentary—will be displayed publicly as part of the permanent installation of the map in UCLA’s historic Powell Library; the installation is due to be completed in 2014. The map, itself, has already been fully digitized and is available through the UCLA Digital Library (Walker, 2011). The research the students conducted not only demonstrates their own learning, but also the ways that Library Special Collections illuminates Los Angeles literary and cultural history. Importantly, all of the students who completed the final course evaluation for the cluster seminar reported strong improvement in their familiarity with the library and its resources and in the development of their research skills.

Conclusion

At the end of the spring quarter, TLS conducted an online survey of faculty and teaching assistants in the Freshman Cluster Program. In response to the question, “What knowledge and skills relevant to your course did students gain as a result of UCLA Library’s engagement with your GE Cluster?,” half of the survey respondents

mentioned special collections, in some cases mentioning the names of specific librarians who provided instruction related to the use of rare and unique primary sources. Representative comments included the following:

- “Knowledge of library facilities, how to use search functions to find scholarly sources on library databases, knowledge of the difference between popular and scholarly sources, assistance in writing and editing research papers, knowledge of library special collections and the structure of the library system.”
- “Students learned how to carry out primary source research in UCLA Special Collections.”
- “My students had an introduction to special collections, which many of them used for their final papers.”

One respondent added, “[h]aving the embedded librarians visible in class more generally helped to engage the students with the idea of the library as a critical part of their educational experience.” Another respondent commented that “students have said that they feel more comfortable with finding resources, and have even taught friends who weren’t in the cluster.” We know now that introducing first year undergraduate students to special collections is both possible and, even, influential, as we seek to inspire them to develop research skills.

In summary, our experimental involvement with the “Los Angeles: The Cluster” proved to be a productive model, which has the potential to be replicated in future offerings of the course. No longer are UCLA librarians and archivists merely providing access to information; instead, they are working together with faculty and students to reimagine courses and create new scholarship about Los Angeles that arises out of engagement with the voices, stories, and documents of its diverse population. In the process, the Library itself is adapting to support students who are not just consumers of information, but also creators of knowledge.

Due to the strength of its rare and unique cultural heritage collections related to Los Angeles and a curricular partnership with the Freshman Cluster Program, the UCLA Library is beginning to foster the production of new, accessible urban history, created in dialogue with experts, emerging citizens, and the diverse communities inhabiting the city. By working with faculty to connect students directly with Los Angeles—traveling into the streets and back into the archives, the Library is learning how to become more responsive, flexible, and mobile. Encouraging students to become intrepid urban explorers and engaged citizens, capable of shaping the polis of the future, is a responsibility of the 21st-century public research university library.

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