

Judy L. Silva

Powerful pedagogy

Facilitating a faculty learning community in special collections

“Though there were many, many things that caught my eye in Special Collections . . . I think I want to examine some of the titles in the Critical Literacy cabinet, particularly as gathered around the idea of representations of race. The question of “Who gets to tell whose story?” is a salient one in creative nonfiction circles, so I’m curious about what we have in the cabinet. Wunderkammer, away!”—FLC participant, week one

Facilitating a Faculty Learning Community (FLC) in Special Collections is an excellent way to introduce faculty to unique primary resources and teaching materials. As a faculty librarian, I facilitated an FLC in which classroom faculty participants explored the university library’s Special Collections to identify resources for enriched pedagogy and original student research. This article outlines the setting, objectives, planning, activities, outcomes, and a discussion about this Special Collections FLC.

FLCs have been defined as “cross-disciplinary faculty and staff group(s) of six to fifteen members . . . who engage in an active, collaborative, yearlong program with a curriculum about enhancing teaching and learning . . . with frequent seminars and activities that provide learning, development, the scholarship of teaching, and community building.”¹ Examples of FLC topics include assessment, blended classrooms, online teaching, and the first-year seminar.²

Academic librarians are increasingly becoming involved in FLCs, both as participants and as facilitators.³ Librarian-hosted FLCs have focused on data literacy, scholarly communication, scholarly writing, and technology training.⁴

The setting

Slippery Rock University (SRU) is a “four-year, public, coeducational, comprehensive university offering a broad array of undergraduate and select graduate programs to more than 8,500 students.”⁵ Faculty at SRU have been engaged in FLCs for several years. These faculty learning communities focused initially on high-impact practices such as undergraduate research, diversity, and global learning. Other topics, deemed powerful pedagogies, have included interdisciplinarity, grant writing, and life design.⁶ Open educational resources (OERs) were the focus of another librarian-led FLC at SRU. This article documents the first FLC to focus on primary source collections at SRU’s Bailey Library.

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Bailey Library's Special Collections houses 14 distinct collections. These include Artists' Books, Autographed Books, Historical Children's Books, Historical Music Education, the Italy Collection, Local Authors, the Japan Collection, the Pennsylvania Collection, Rare Books, and four eponymous collections. Additionally, the newly created Critical Literacy Collection provides a framework for teaching students about "socially constructed concepts such as power, inequality, and injustice in human relationships."⁷ Special Collections resources support a wide array of disciplines but are used only by a handful of faculty and some independent student researchers. The University Archives enjoys a somewhat larger researcher base, despite a lack of broad campus awareness about its educational offerings.

The FLC described in this article was inspired by my recent sabbatical project, which explored avenues for increasing undergraduate research in archives and special collections. Facilitating an FLC provided an opportunity to host faculty in an exploration of SRU's Special Collections and University Archives.

Objectives

This FLC's objectives were for participants to learn about the resources housed in Special Collections, to discover materials to engage students on a variety of topics, and to identify resources to teach with that support the university's Student Learning Objectives (SLOs). The specified SLOs were critical thinking skills; development as a whole person, particularly making connections beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries; creativity and development of aesthetic appreciation; becoming civically engaged; acting ethically; and developing a worldview that acknowledges diversity and global interdependence.

Planning

The University's Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL) coordinates FLC offerings. Prospective facilitators submit proposals to the CTL prior to the start of each semester. If a proposal is approved, the facilitator is informed, and interested faculty may sign up. These potential participants are then contacted by the respective facilitators for group planning and scheduling.

My proposal was well-received, with eight initial applicants. Half of the participants came from the English Department, with one each from Art, Elementary Education, and Secondary Education. A preliminary Zoom meeting was held to discuss participants' learning objectives and schedule the requisite five meetings. Though not required, I created a "course shell" in the university's learning management system, D2L. This allowed for asynchronous communication, discussion, and ultimately a location for participants to share their presentations.

Activities

The Special Collections FLC met face-to-face in the university library during the fall 2021 semester. At the week one meeting, participants introduced themselves and further articulated their learning objectives. The possibility of exploring University Archives was discussed and embraced. I led a tour of Special Collections, highlighting the unique characteristics of each subcollection. Registration forms were completed, followed by a discussion about safe handling practices. The participants spent the remainder of the hour merrily exploring Special Collections.

Weeks two and three allowed participants further time for exploration, discovery, and reflection. Interested participants visited University Archives to see a recent accession of 25 oversized scrapbooks and a collection of student publications spanning the institution's 132-year history.

By week four, having identified items of particular interest, participants focused on how they planned to incorporate selected resources into their pedagogy. They continued to research their chosen titles and began to create their presentations.

Week five was the grand finale, with participants presenting their findings. Topics included 18th-century satire, an 1811 book about notorious criminals, a comparison of two 19th-century first editions of poetry, 19th-century Japanese printmakers, an 1892 steel workers' strike, examples of 20th-century co-opted cultural narratives, 21st-century artists' books, and an exploration of SRU's history from normal school to university.⁸ Narrated, electronic presentations were conducted in person with one exception delivered remotely. Participants did an outstanding job of introducing their chosen resources and plans to incorporate them into their pedagogy, edifying all of us with their presentations.

Outcomes

My objective of engaging faculty colleagues to incorporate resources from Special Collections into their pedagogy was achieved. The FLC participants enthusiastically researched materials that support their curriculum, and have already used these to enhance student learning in their classrooms, bringing students to use the resources in the library. One participant made discoveries in the University Archives that she plans to use to teach future social studies educators. Another participant serves as the advisor to the university's chapter of Sigma Tau Delta, the English honorary society, and hopes to bring those students to the archives to see the chapter's publications. One student researcher immediately visited Special Collections to see a participant-recommended book pertaining to her own research.⁹ All of the participants expressed delight in spending time with primary resources that could enhance their teaching.

Discussion

This Special Collections FLC was held during SRU's first semester back on campus following two-and-a-half semesters taught remotely due to the pandemic. While the possibility of including online participants would have allowed more faculty to take part, I determined that the loss of direct experience with Special Collections materials was an insurmountable deterrent. As a result, only six of the eight initial registrants ultimately completed the FLC, with two online instructors dropping out before it began.

Scheduling the five meetings was a challenge, as no common times could be found for the entire group. The solution was to establish two alternative days within each of the meeting weeks. This proved to be beneficial, as smaller groups allowed for more intimate interaction. Furthermore, as participants' schedules fluctuated over the semester, the makeup of the small groups morphed from meeting to meeting, ultimately allowing all of the participants to interact.

The creation of the learning management course shell, while not heavily used, served as a vehicle for me to share information, and allowed for asynchronous discussion among participants. The dropbox feature allowed participants to share their presentations within

the group in a restricted environment. Each of the participants completing the FLC and I will be awarded a stipend for future professional development.

Conclusion

The participants' responses to this FLC were tremendously positive. While some had visited Special Collections previously, none had found time to explore the collections at length. Several mentioned a long-held interest in doing so, with the FLC finally providing the impetus to delve more deeply. Participants' presentations were very well-conceived, informative, and engaging. I enjoyed the entire FLC experience and expanded my own knowledge of the collections through the collaborative interaction and participants' research. It is my hope to facilitate another Special Collections FLC in the future.

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Notes

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