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Texts and Memories; Excavating meaning, Communicating Values.

Eve Graves
 Camberwell College of Arts
 University of the Arts London.
 London, England

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Abstract

This paper explores the ideas that are informing the development of a book conservation foundation degree. The curriculum is built upon an awareness that people from across the world value and use material in different ways. The paper explains several reflective projects that have been developed with students to explore ideas about the meaning, use and value of items and collections that encapsulate human knowledge and memory. Students engage in these projects while they are learning the practical and specialist skills of the profession. The projects are shown to deepen understanding and commitment and encourage communication and life-long learning.

While as a profession we seek ways to alert the wider public to the fragility of humanity's cultural heritage, we need to ensure that those we educate to be the front line custodians of this material fully understand and internalize the significance of their role. Only then will they deeply appreciate the need to be advocates for preservation.

The following ideas have been forming over many years of educating students in conservation from a wide variety of cultures and backgrounds. In many ways the students themselves are our greatest resource and provide the richest opportunities for learning for their teachers and each other. They are also our greatest asset for the future. When our increasingly multicultural groups

of students begin their professional careers they take with them an increased store of approaches and ideas because they have been encouraged to explore the diverse attitudes and values each person brings. They also develop the desire to continue to communicate their ideas and, crucially, to listen to the ideas of others.

The conservation department of Camberwell College of Arts, now a constituent college of the University of the Arts London, has been educating students in the field of conservation for many years at both undergraduate and postgraduate level. There is currently a three year honours degree programme that focuses on the conservation of organic materials. This developed out of Camberwell's long tradition of book and paper conservation. There is also a 30 week Postgraduate Diploma which allows graduates from other related disciplines, science or humanities based, to gain access to the field and a very intensive Masters Degree where participants specialize in either paper or books. All three programmes attract students from many different countries.

Over the years these course have responded to changes in the profession and consequent changes in the expectations that employers have of their new employees. As earlier forms of qualifications evolved into honours degree level studies and beyond so the broader and deeper aspects of higher level education, particularly the analytical and reflective aspects, evolved also. Many institutions, museums, libraries, archives and others value the open-minded, flexible and cooperative approach that Camberwell is trying to encourage in its graduates.

Of course, in the fields of library and archive conservation, as in all others, the hands-on skills are also essential. They remain at the core of the profession's ability to care for, increasingly often to rescue, cultural heritage globally. Many posts now focus on preventive conservation because of the sheer volume of material to be cared for and the ever-present issues around resources. However, the need to keep the skills alive and fresh is crucial. Camberwell is attempting to address these issues as it develops a new Foundation Degree in Book Conservation.

The need to address education for book conservation is particularly pressing as was made very clear in a study undertaken by the British Library (British Library 2004). After much deliberation between the various stakeholders in this area it was decided that a foundation degree run by an educational institution with an established reputation in the field in cooperation with institutions with collections of library materials was the way forward.

A central aspect of foundation degrees in the UK is that they are closely linked with the relevant profession and are designed and developed with the needs of the profession in mind. Students following this programme at Camberwell will spend one brief and one substantial period of time working as part of a professional team within a conservation department of a museum, library or independent studio. These work based learning placements, of course, have to be carefully arranged and monitored to ensure parity of educational experience. The British Library's report has been a rich source of information about the skills and bodies of knowledge prioritized by the profession. The challenge has been to address the need for the acquisition of appropriate skills and techniques – a need only addressed by substantial periods of studio teaching and supervised practice - while also educating the students with all the necessary scientific, historical and ethical understanding.

This challenge is essentially the same as that facing the education of students within any other conservation field. Conservation is clearly a multidisciplinary subject and therefore requires a range of learning activities and the ability to access many different bodies of knowledge. This can be overwhelming to the student as in the early stages as it can be difficult to fully grasp the links between all these disparate ideas and approaches. I have written elsewhere about an essential feature of how this is dealt with at Camberwell by the use of Reflective Learning Journals where students can write about their response to different aspects of their programme, or to heritage issues reported in the media, reflect on the development of their learning and think about their growing understanding of the nature of conservation. (Graves 2005)

In what follows I will describe just two projects that were first piloted several years ago with undergraduates and that have subsequently been adapted and developed for postgraduate students. These are now being incorporated into the reflective projects for the new Foundation Degree Book Conservation students. It should be borne in mind that these activities I am describing will take place in parallel with intensive studio teaching and are also supported by science sessions and in the case of the new programme an by accompanying lecture series on the history of the book and historical bibliography. These methods are designed to encourage a particular approach rather than to impart information. The overriding aim is to promote a desire to think about the 'lives' of all those artefacts we find in museums, galleries, libraries and archives. This approach encourages them to explore the human values, past, present and future, that inform a conservator's decisions. Items in collections may be displayed to the public, kept in archives for frequent or occasional consultation, or perhaps in libraries for constant use. Obviously these current and future contexts are major factors in the conservators' decisions. For this reason all courses begin with visits to a range of cultural institutions. These are not initially to conservation departments but to exhibitions spaces of all types where students can think about the ways in which material is displayed and interpreted. They also speak to a variety of individuals fulfilling professional roles in the institutions. These vary from year to year but may include information officers, curators, security staff, designers, education officers, collections managers, project managers and researchers. Visits to conservation studios come a little later when the students have had time to build up a picture of the complex web of relationships between people and departments in cultural institutions. They begin to appreciate that even within a single institution there may be very many different attitudes towards the collections. They are therefore also made more aware of the need for a sensitive, flexible and cooperative approach.

In the early part of their programme new students are asked to imagine an exhibition about their own lives. They are asked to select an item or small group of items, that for some reason has value to them and to exhibit it in what might be regarded as a traditional museum manner, with a label and explanatory text. They are encouraged to try to communicate the meanings of their chosen objects to an audience of their peers. Some objects are very ordinary everyday items; articles of clothing or jewellery such as gloves, rings and belts. These had often belonged to a parent or grandparent. Through these objects and the memories they contain of warmth and comfort or sadness and loss they communicate with each other. They explore ways in which things are linked for them with people and places and periods or moments of time in their own lives. Writing about this afterwards in their reflective learning journals most comment about the ways in which thinking about how their objects had acquired meaning for them makes them more aware of the possibilities of values as yet undetected in material they see in exhibitions.

This is reinforced when the items are displayed and the whole group ‘visits’ the exhibition. As they read one another’s text and ask questions, explore differences and similarities many new ideas emerge. When the group is comprised of men and women of different ages and backgrounds, from different countries and continents, this is particularly rewarding

Very often the things that the students choose as particularly rich in personal meanings for them are the types of material found in libraries and archives across the world – photographs, letters, concert programmes, theatre tickets, scrapbooks, certificates of achievement and of course books. The brief labels that they are asked to write as their starting point identify types of object, date and place of manufacture and materials used. They are distant, factual, and neutral. But the accompanying text, the attempt to encapsulate in a few paragraphs something whose significance has perhaps never been articulated before can have unexpected results. Some write unselfconsciously in the first person and try to explain what the object means to them;

When I turn the pages of this book and see each animal represented I hear my mother’s voice, growling or barking or braying like a slightly hoarse donkey and it makes me smile however sad I am.

Others distance themselves by adopting the third person, a curatorial voice, and write as if to mediate between themselves and their audience. They become the authoritative voice of the museum but with privileged access to the meanings in the object:

This letter was sent to....by her grandfather when she was feeling particularly anxious about her future. It has been unfolded for reading so many times that it is now severely damaged along the folds.

Another wrote;

Every day her grandmother read to her from this book and marked the progress of her reading by turning down the corners of the page.

These last two observations of course immediately allow the discussion to turn to conservation issues in relation to meaning and use. In a monastery in Egypt many years ago I remember watching an elderly monk pick up an ancient text to hold close to his eyes to read. As he did so tiny fragments of material fell from the already damaged book. He was not being careless just using the book for its intended purpose as he no doubt always had. In our institutions we lament the discovery of a book defaced by underlinings with felt tip pens yet we rejoice at the discovery of an ancient text carefully annotated in an earlier century. These simple observations can lead on to discussions of professional codes of practice for libraries, ideas about the history of reading and use of books and the difference between conservation approaches for a book to be supported in a display case and one to be readied for return to regular use by the public. There is nothing exceptional about any of this of course. We as teachers or employers can tell the student these things. But it is clear from my reading of the student journals that knowledge that is constructed by the individual from their own experience is knowledge that lasts and is more likely to be applied in practice.

The second project I will describe here is one that again recognizes the need to for everyone to be sensitive to the potentially multiple narratives objects may contain and the layers of meaning that they may have. Here the students are offered a choice of artefacts belonging to client to whom they have access. As with the previous project this is not about interventive conservation and requires no resources except the objects themselves and a clean space for their examination. The students are simply asked to advise the owner (in writing) how best to look after their material. They may decide that interventive treatment of some sort would be desirable and if so they write a treatment proposal.

Having been sensitized to the need to understand the objects by their earlier work they set about exploring the material. One participant wrote in his journal that it was like ‘excavating’ as layer upon layer of meaning was exposed. Unlike the first project none of the participants has any personal connection to the material. However it is clear that individual items of study are often chosen because of some connection to the *type* of material or to something else that it may represent. For instance on the BA Conservation course a patchwork family quilt started in the 1940s was immediately chosen by a mature student from Australia who used quilts in her artwork. Her discussion of her interest in this item and what the quilt tradition had meant to her family was fascinating to other students from different continents. This also led to the observation that no matter how unfamiliar an exhibited item might be there is nearly always something in an individual’s prior experience that provides a starting point for meaning to be created. This is, of course, something that curators and exhibition designers do well to encourage.

In an earlier year group three students (from England, France and Sweden) joined together to investigate two silk embroidered First World War postcards sent by a soldier from the trenches of Europe to his sweetheart back at home. Another item investigated was a Roman Missal that had little cards and slips of paper mostly of a religious nature and souvenirs including pressed flowers inserted between its pages. Students from China, England and Japan worked on this book, enormously enriching the range of approaches and therefore the learning experiences of everyone involved.

Because all these items belong to someone else they were able to ask questions about the ways in which the objects were valued and what the owners intended to do with them. They therefore had to reflect on the need for sensitivity when pursuing research and also to be alert to possible ethical issues involved. The project culminates in the written proposals for treatment and in presentations to peer groups and staff where they communicate their findings and the decisions they make. These are then discussed. In this way the students gain insight into several valuable research processes and the human issues involved when dealing with the cultural property of others. A poster will be presented in the IIC conference in Munich this year which shows how one group of students took the experience a stage further by thinking about the wider dissemination of aspects of their intended profession. (Graves et al 2006)

Because of the value of these and similar projects for deepening the commitment, understanding and desire to communicate of aspiring professionals, the central ideas have been incorporated into the new Foundation Degree course structure. New students will also be given the guardianship of one individual book as soon as they arrive and asked to document its condition

and research its nature over the coming weeks and months. As their course unfolds they will be asked to write in their journals about how their ideas develop as they have more information, knowledge, skills and understanding with which to explore their book. It is hoped that in these ways they will come to reflect on the nature of learning in such a way that it will enrich their understanding of the importance of libraries, museums and archives worldwide. So when our students leave Camberwell and enter the book conservation profession they will bring not just their practical skills and knowledge but also a determination to continue their learning and an enthusiasm for promoting the learning of others in the field of cultural heritage preservation.

A footnote - if any of your institutions would be interested in hosting one or more of our students for their extended placement in their second year please do get in touch with us.

References

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The Students of Camberwell Conservation Department
Museum & Library Colleagues everywhere