

Experiential Learning for Rare Books and Print Culture

Exploring the Morrison Collection at HKU Libraries

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A.

Introduction

Special collections in libraries often hold rare and unique materials that provide valuable insights into history, culture, and literature. Last year, I led students on a visit to the Morrison Collection at HKU to introduce **object-based learning (OBL)** into **ENGL2076 Romanticism**. We spent two hours with the collection, viewing and discussing materials I had selected beforehand with **Mr Garfield Lam**, University Archivist and Head of Archives and Special Collections. Materials included literary works as well as encyclopaedias and texts from geography, history, and philosophy, allowing students to examine a range of rare books and historical materials that directly related to the course learning outcomes for Romanticism.

B.

Morrison Collection

The Morrison Collection is a rare book collection at HKU Libraries with origins tracing back to **1806** when a library was established by members of the English Factory in Canton. It later became the library of the Morrison Education Society in memory of **Anglo-Scottish protestant missionary Rev. Robert Morrison, D.D.** The eventually became part of the University of Hong Kong in 1925.



C.

Learning Activities

Students were invited to describe the selected rare books one by one, focusing on the physical characteristics and materiality of each object. Students were then asked to relate what they observed about the object to ideas and materials discussed in previous classes.

Understanding Print Culture

One of the key activities involved consulting poetic works within the Morrison Collection, such as the first volume of **P.B. Shelley's *Posthumous Poems* (1824)**, edited and published by his wife **Mary Shelley**, author of *Frankenstein*, after Percy's death. A notable observation was the absence of the more political poems we studied in class within this volume. This discrepancy led to a deeper discussion about the complicated **histories of book publication and textual dissemination in the Romantic period**. Another observation was around Mary Shelley's use of prefatory material to frame the poems, which helped students further understand discussions around the role of **paratexts** from earlier weeks. More generally, I prompted students to consider **why certain texts are included or excluded** from specific collections, including this one, thereby fostering critical thinking in relation to the course themes.

Exploring Knowledge Networks

The examination of materials like the **travelogue of James Cook** and its connection to **Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner"** or non-fiction material on China and their connections to **orientalism in De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*** highlighted the **networks of colonial knowledge** which shaped Romantic-era literature. This analysis deepened their understanding of the complexities of cultural exchange and power dynamics inherent in Romantic writing, aligning with the course's focus on exploring diverse perspectives and challenging Eurocentric narratives.

Career Exploration

The opportunity to interact with Mr Lam and learn about his research provided students with insights into **potential career paths in archives and libraries**. By engaging in discussions about the archivist's work and the role of special collections in preserving cultural heritage, students were able to envision how their academic interests in Romantic literature could **translate into meaningful professional opportunities** in the field of cultural heritage preservation and scholarly research.

Building Affective Connections

By engaging directly with rare books and historical materials, students were encouraged to develop a deeper emotional and intellectual connection to the literary period. As students examined the **marginal notes, drawings, and signatures left behind by previous owners and readers of these books**, they gained a greater appreciation for the **dynamic social lives of these fascinating objects**. Moreover, by engaging with the collection objects, students discovered aspects of **HKU's history**, strengthening their connection with the university and its unique institutional identity and legacy.

ENGL2076 Projected Learning Outcomes

Students will be able to:

- Discuss texts of the Romantic period in relation to key historical and cultural contexts.
- Analyze Romantic-era prose and poetry in terms of literary technique, genre, and style.
- Reflect upon critical debates in Romantic studies and relate them to contemporary concerns.

D.

Reflections

For future iterations, I would follow up with **assignments** that encourage reflective learning and allow me to assess student learning. For example, students could **write a reflection** on their experience to solidify their understanding. A more extensive project could involve **researching and writing about a specific item** from the collection, making the learning process more **student-centered, inquiry-based, and aligned with object-based learning principles**. Students could collaborate in groups to generate questions about the book's significance and **give a presentation** about the object, further enhancing their investigative and communication skills. In the future, I would also supplement the activity with **hands-on workshops** around print culture to give students a more tactile learning experience.

E.

Conclusion

Special Books Collections like the Morrison Collection at HKU Libraries offer valuable resources for exploring history, literature, and culture through experiential learning with rare books and unique materials. By integrating object-based learning into educational practices, students can enhance their learning experience, develop critical skills, and deepen their connection to course contents.

Further Reading

Helen J. Chatterjee and Leonie Hannan (eds), *Engaging the Senses: Object-Based Learning in Higher Education* (London: Routledge, 2015)
Ann R. Hawkins (ed), *Teaching Bibliography, Textual Criticism, and Book History* (London: Routledge, 2006)

