The Teaching of 'Book History' in English and Cultural Studies Units

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Book history is a field of study concerned with 'the influence of manuscript or printed materials on the development and transmission of culture', typically concentrating on six related topics: 'authorship, book selling, printing, publishing, distribution, and reading' (West, 2003). This article evaluates the teaching of book history in English and Cultural Studies units at the University of Western Australia (UWA), which ceased offering a stand-alone unit on the subject in the late 1980s. Since then, book history is only ever addressed in English and Cultural Studies units as an ancillary to other themes and theoretical inclinations, in particular text based formalist criticism. As this approach is typical of Australian universities, the findings of this paper have implications outside of UWA. It is the intention of this article to establish current practices associated with the teaching of book history at the tertiary level. Furthermore, this article demonstrates some of the pedagogical advantages of incorporating book history into the English curriculum, before suggesting that contextualist literary theory, of which book history is an example, is better suited than formalist literary theory to contemporary ideas about good teaching practice, as well as meeting expectations about the generic skills students should possess upon completion of a university course. In an effort to support these claims, staff were surveyed and follow up interviews were conducted. Overall, the findings suggest that staff practice contextualist criticism and raise issues of book history (especially in their lectures), but they rarely identify these practices to their students, thereby depriving both parties of a potentially valuable teaching and learning opportunity.

Introduction

At the university level, most teaching is supported by a critical and theoretical framework, whether this is informed by knowledge of theories of teaching and learning, or perhaps carried over from the teacher's own research interests and disciplinary protocols. Students are often unaware of the existence of these frameworks, much less how they function and influence their education. In the discipline of English,

in this century, in English-speaking countries, it is text-centric formalism which has held the institutional power, and for this reason has become the orthodoxy, the ideologically dominant approach. (Docker, 1984, p. 84)

In Australia, 'text-centric formalism' has adopted various critical vestments (including, most notably, New Criticism and Leavisism), but these all share a few common features: in particular, their 'insistence on the autonomy of the text, the text's freedom from history and its own creator' (Docker, 1984, p. 48). It is important to note that these formalist literary theories do not want to isolate the text from its 'cultural and historical contexts' as completely as depicted by their critics (Eagleton, 1996, p. 37). But even if formalist literary theories are not interested in an absolute, all encompassing 'denial of the relevance of
historical information for the business of poetic interpretation' (Wellek, 1972, p. 555), it is fair to say that they are, nonetheless, interested in 'objectivity in criticism, by eliminating as far as possible all evidence extraneous to the text, the "words on the page"' (emphasis added) (Lodge, 1972, p. 70).

Yet, the formalist 'regime' has been challenged in the twentieth century by 'the Freudian approach ... the Marxist ... and, in Australia, the radical nationalist' (Docker, 1984, p. 84). Each of these varieties of contextualist literary theory sees a text 'in its relationship to something else, a preferred context, whatever it might be, that will help explicate a work's character', whereas 'formalism is very limited in its aims. It sets out to describe and evoke, rather than to explain' (Docker, 1984, p. 85). Contextualist literary theory maintains that

a text cannot be studied as a self-sufficient entity - we can't be satisfied with merely studying its internal relations or its relationship exclusively to other texts. Ideally, we have to examine a text's conditions of production and consumption (or reception) as well as its specific internal reality. (Docker, 1984, p. 208)

This article suggests that a contextualist literary theory is better suited than a formalist literary theory to contemporary ideas about good teaching practice, as well as meeting expectations about the generic skills students should possess upon completion of a university course. But rather than arguing for any of the aforementioned contextualist approaches - Freudian, Marxist or radical nationalist - this article suggests the pedagogical advantages of incorporating book history into the English curriculum, with reference to a 'deep' approach to learning, 'performative' understanding, and 'reflective practice'.

What is book history?

So what is book history, exactly? The simplest definition is that book history

    delves into the context in which printed materials - broadly defined to include books, newspapers, political pamphlets, and all other forms of the written word - are produced and received. (Winkler, 1993, p. A7)

But this definition, limited as it is to the 'context' of book production and reception, does not do justice to the breadth of the field. A more far reaching definition is in order:

    In the broadest sense, book historians study the influence of manuscript or printed materials on the development and transmission of culture. Usually they concentrate on a group of related topics: authorship, book selling, printing, publishing, distribution, and reading. A book historian places these activities into economic, technical, and cultural contexts for a particular time and place. The goal is to understand the role of the book in the history of a given society. (West, 2003)

So in addition to concerning itself with the 'context in which printed materials ... are produced and received', book history is interested in the 'development and transmission of culture'. The latter category encompasses the former while also carving out a much wider swathe of interest and influence, including 'the entire history of written communication' (Greenspan & Rose, 1998, p. ix). Clearly, as was noted in a Times Literary Supplement article on the subject, 'the book as a force in history is a vast topic' (Woudhuysen, 1993, p. 16).

The history of international interest in book history

Book history had its beginnings in France with the French annales school of historians. These scholars
emphasised 'broad social movements drawing on detailed statistical evidence', an approach which would later become heavily influential in the field (Finkelstein & McCleery, 2006, p. 1). From these geographically circumscribed beginnings, 'the discipline spread to England and Germany in the 1960s and 1970s and began to make its appearance in [the United States], as a formally recognised field of study, in the late 1970s' (West, 2003). However, until the mid-1980s, there remained two distinct book history methodologies: the French school which examined culture and 'the impact of the book on society', and the Anglo-American school which was 'primarily bibliographical, and concerned with the book as a physical object' (Antonetti, 2006, p. 20). This article is less concerned with the latter approach - the 'technical analysis of individual books or editions characteristic of bibliography' - as it has in recent times come to be viewed as merely a single contribution to book history's more far reaching interrogation of the cultural value of printed materials (Finkelstein & McCleery, 2006, p. 1).

In 1982, American academic Robert Darnton (1982) surveyed the field of book history and predicted that it 'seems likely to win a place alongside fields like the history of science and the history of art in the canon of scholarly discipline' (p. 65). He may be correct in his assessment: 'The field is now well-established, with several scholarly organisations holding conferences and publishing newsletters', and the emergence of centres dedicated to researching book history, including the Centre for the Book at Monash University (West, 2003). Implicit in the most contemporary definition of book history employed by many of these institutions is a dismantling of 'the artificial boundaries posited by competing academic fields' (Finkelstein & McCleery, 2005, p. 10). This process of dismantling disciplinary boundaries enhances student learning by encouraging connections between otherwise disparate fields of knowledge, as well as opening up for examination our own intellectual history. By now it should be clear why The Chronicle of Higher Education declared 'book history a particularly hot topic in the humanities - and not just in the United States' (Winkler, 1993, p. A7).

Book history publications and organisations in Australia

The first ever national history of the book, L’Histoire de l’Edition Francaise, was published in France in 1985. Since then, national histories of the book have been produced in Britain, Wales, Scotland, Ireland, the Netherlands, Canada, the United States, and New Zealand, just to name a few. In 1993, a working group was formed to coordinate the writing of a history of the book in Australia in three parts. Volume I of this project, covering the period up to 1890, has yet to be published, but Volume II, A History of the Book in Australia, 1891-1945: A National Culture in a Colonised Market, edited by Martyn Lyons and John Arnold, was published by the University of Queensland Press in 2001. Volume III, Paper Empires: A History of the Book in Australia, 1946-2005, edited by Craig Munro and Robyn Sheahan-Bright, was subsequently published in 2006.

The History of the Book project contributes to a perception of book history as 'emerging' but already possessing the requisite credentials. The only other major scholarly publication in the area of Australian book history, is the 2007 release of Making Books: Contemporary Australian Publishing, edited by David Carter and Anne Galligan. This book is a wide ranging study of contemporary Australian book publishing, once again published by the University of Queensland Press and featuring essays by established Australian academics and book industry figures.

The Bibliographical Society of Australia and New Zealand (BSANZ), a scholarly organisation with a diverse membership drawn from the ranks of academics, rare book librarians, collectors, printers, and antiquarian booksellers, has a much longer history than either of these publications, dating back to 1969. In fact, its members have contributed essays to both of the aforementioned projects. However, the organisation's focus on the area of physical bibliography - the history of printing, publishing, book selling, paper making, and bookbinding - has hindered its engagement with more recent interest in book
history, which is increasingly concerned with matters outside the mandate of physical bibliography, such as authorship, reading habits and reader response criticism. BSANZ hosts an annual conference on the subject of bibliography and its refereed scholarly journal, *Script and Print*, is published quarterly.

**Stand-alone book history units in Australian universities**

In short, there are very few stand-alone book history units in Australian universities. There are, in other words, very few units offered at Australian universities where the focus is on the topic of book history, rather than book history being offered merely as an ancillary to, for example, more traditional studies of literature, creative writing or cultural studies. Given the paucity of stand-alone book history units, they are not the focus of this article. Nonetheless, it is useful to indicate with a few broad brush strokes what stand-alone units in book history are available in Australian universities.

The University of Western Australia (UWA) offered an Honours unit in bibliography from the late 1970s until the late 1980s. This unit was coordinated by Dr Dorothy Collin and emphasised an understanding of book production processes and, in particular, textual degradation as necessary for a more complete appreciation of nineteenth century manuscripts. In order to accomplish this goal, Collin secured a printing press, which was housed in various locations on campus during its tenure at the university, and taught the students how to set type and print their own creations. The unit was discontinued after UWA Press, in whose offices the printing press was being stored, needed the extra space; the State Library of Western Australia agreed to pay the costs associated with moving the printing press, if they could then claim ownership of the press and shift it to their own premises. The printing press was on display for several years, but it is currently sitting unused in the basement of the State Library, and a stand-alone book history or bibliography unit has not since been offered at UWA.

It is often the case that book history units are relegated to the margins of Australian universities. Rather than occupying a place of importance inside such traditional university subjects as English and History, book history is often found under the auspices of more industry based courses such as Library Studies or Publishing and Editing. For example, Monash University's Masters of Arts (MA) program in Publishing and Editing includes a subject, 'Publishing History, Culture and Commerce', which makes use of a wide range of sources including selections from the two volumes of the History of the Book in Australia project. Even at the University of Melbourne, which offers more stand-alone units in book history than perhaps any other Australian university - including 'The Contemporary Publishing Industry' and 'History of Books and Reading' - these units are largely directed at students enrolled in its Publishing and Communications program. These units also more quietly made available to those completing a Bachelor of Arts Honours or MA in Media and Communications, but even this program is external to the University of Melbourne's more traditional and scholarly Department of English with Cultural Studies.

**Teaching book history as ancillary to other themes**

More typical is the teaching of book history as ancillary to other themes, rather than as a stand-alone unit. This is certainly the case at UWA where, as was mentioned above, there is no longer offered a unit dedicated to the subjects of bibliography or book history. Therefore, a survey of staff in the discipline of English and Cultural Studies - the discipline most apt to incorporate book history topics into its curricula, though these topics have relevance in other disciplines and further study of its application in such novel settings is in order - was conducted in order to ascertain the role of book history when it is taught as an ancillary to other themes. Notably, the following conclusions are derived from these staff surveys (and some follow up interviews) and no data was gathered directly from students; it is acknowledged that there may be a discrepancy between what the teacher practices or addresses in lectures and tutorials, and what the student experiences or recognises. Nonetheless, it is the contention of this article that a survey
of staff attitudes and perceptions is indubitably valuable as a starting point for the assessment of any teaching and learning activity.

The website for the discipline of English and Cultural Studies at UWA lists seventeen members of staff with teaching responsibilities. Surveys were distributed to each of these individuals, and ten completed surveys were received, comprising nearly 60 percent of staff. While this sample constitutes a significant proportion of staff in the discipline of English and Cultural Studies at UWA, it is admittedly small when considering generalising these findings to other universities; further inquiries could result in potentially interesting comparisons between academics within this same field in different universities.

In the first section of the survey, staff were asked questions about their own familiarity, as well as perceptions of their students' familiarity, with the topic of book history. A five-point Likert scale was used. Staff registered their responses as either Very familiar (5), Familiar (4), Sort of familiar (3), Barely familiar (2), or Not at all (1). The mean responses to each question in Section One of the survey are presented in Table 1. On average, staff claim a greater understanding of the topic of book history, while crediting students with a much lesser understanding of the topic or even awareness of the term 'book history'.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Scale range utilised</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prior to receiving this questionnaire and the attached letter, how familiar were you with the term 'book history' and the related field of inquiry?</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3.88</td>
<td>2-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How aware are you of specific trends or recent achievements (e.g. significant publications) in the field of book history?</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2-4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How familiar are your students with the term 'book history' and the related field of inquiry?</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1.86</td>
<td>1-3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How familiar are your students with the term 'bibliography', as in the area of study concerned with the history, physical description, and classification of books and other works?</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2.29</td>
<td>1-4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Space was provided after each question for the respondent to note any 'Further comments'. Staff were generally hesitant to claim any great familiarity with specific trends or recent achievements in the field of book history; a couple typical responses declared only limited knowledge about the field as it related to their specific research interests: 'I try to keep up with what is happening in terms of post-colonial work in the field', and 'Mostly in the field of Australian publishing'. Nonetheless, they were generally more generous in rating their familiarity with the term 'book history' and the related field of inquiry.

A typical response to Question 3, however, was that students are 'probably not familiar' with the term 'book history', 'as I use instances of book history, but don't position them within that field or delineate the field for them'.

In the second section of the survey, staff were asked questions about the frequency with which they raise book history topics in their teaching practice. Again, a five-point Likert scale was used. Staff registered their responses as either Often (5), Sometimes (4), Occasionally (3), Rarely (2), or Never (1). The mean responses to each question in Section Two of the survey are presented in Table 2.
Table 2: Number of participants, means and scale range utilised for each question

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Scale range utilised</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 How often do you draw students' attention to matters such as the date a text was published and the specific circumstances of this period (e.g. historical/political events, publication trends, technological advances, readership patterns) that might have impacted on its production and/or reception?</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4.69</td>
<td>3-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 How often do you practice text based formalist criticism in your lectures and tutorials?</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4.25</td>
<td>2-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 How often do you practice contextualist criticism in your lectures and tutorials?</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>2-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4a Book history is often divided into six topics. How often do you address authorship in your teaching?</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4.69</td>
<td>4-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4b How often do you address book selling?</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>1-3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4c How often do you address printing?</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2.25</td>
<td>1-3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4d How often do you address publishing?</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3.44</td>
<td>2-4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4e How often do you address distribution?</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3.13</td>
<td>2-4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4f How often do you address reading?</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3.94</td>
<td>3-5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Staff responses seem to indicate a general disagreement with Docker's aforementioned assessment that 'it is text-centric formalism which has held the institutional power'. Staff claim to practice contextualist criticism just as often, if not more often, than text based formalist criticism; they also purport to draw students' attention to the specific circumstances of the period in which a text was produced that might have impacted on its production or reception. Admittedly, there are certain circumstances or topics towards which staff are less likely to draw students' attention, including book selling and printing. Authorship and reading, on the other hand, ranked highly as topics staff address in their teaching.

In the space for 'Further comments', a couple staff wrote that contextualist criticism 'may seem more pertinent to historical literary study with texts from earlier periods', rather than more contemporary work. A couple more staff noted that they believe 'formalist criticism ... cannot be separated from contextualist criticism even if examples don't invoke their own contexts of production/reception'. Follow up interviews were conducted with four of the staff members who responded to the survey, during which these two points, as well as numerous other issues, were discussed.

The general agreement in these interviews was that, while it may be more common for staff to practice contextualist criticism in relation to older texts, there is certainly also a place for this sort of discussion in relation to more contemporary work. One of the reasons cited for the hesitancy of staff to engage with these issues when studying more contemporary work, is that staff are unclear about just how much they can assume students know about the contemporary context - social, political and ideological, but also the book industry context - in which these texts emerged.

As for the assertion by a couple of those surveyed that 'formalist criticism ... cannot be separated from contextualist criticism', this was a matter of some contention in the follow up interviews. The four staff interviewed generally agreed with this assertion on a theoretical level; however, when closely examined
in a practical environment the veracity of this statement - or, at the very least, its usefulness - came into question. After being encouraged to reflect further on their own teaching practice, staff acknowledged they often practice contextualist criticism in lectures, but much less often in tutorials, where they are more likely to examine formal aspects of the text. One interviewee went so far as to allege that students are not 'theoretically well-equipped' to discuss contextualist features such as a text's reception, publishing history or authorship. Clearly, if staff are able to identify contextualist criticism as a significant feature of their lectures, while the focus of tutorials is on formalist criticism, then for the sake of a pedagogical discussion contextualist and formalist criticisms can be discussed as separate - if perhaps overlapping - interests in the discipline of English and Cultural Studies.

Book history falls within the scope of contextualist criticism, and it is because the latter approach is not often employed in tutorials that students remain ignorant of the term 'book history' and the related field of inquiry.

**Why teach book history?**

Book history is finding its way into the curricula of a rapidly expanding number of overseas universities. Rapid technological innovation is only expected to make the study of book history more useful:

> In the next fifty years the entirety of our inherited archive of cultural works will have to be re-edited within a network of digital storage, access, and dissemination. This system, which is already under development, is transnational and transcultural. ... We will be needing young people well-trained in the histories of textual transmission and the theory and practice of scholarly method and editing ... Electronic scholarship and editing necessarily draw their primary models from long-standing philological practices in language study, textual scholarship, and bibliography. (McGann, 2004, p. 410)

Clearly, there are practical reasons to encourage students in the study of book history.

The particular practical reason identified above - a demand for students familiar with the processes of textual production and transmission, in order to manage the relationship between textual material and new technologies - is closely related to one of the Educational Principles espoused by UWA. This Educational Principle states that students 'are encouraged and facilitated to develop the ability and desire ... to acquire the skills needed to embrace rapidly changing technologies in a global environment'. Whether or not it has been explicitly articulated, the spirit of this principle is surely shared by other Australian universities. However, there are very few opportunities in an English course for students to develop 'the skills needed to embrace rapidly changing technologies'. A unit that engages critically with issues of book history is one such opportunity, and it should not be missed if UWA and other Australian universities are serious about achieving this goal. The study of book history can easily incorporate these sorts of 'rapidly changing technologies' in a hands on way, if that is the skill set it is desired students learn, but perhaps more importantly book history encourages students to engage with the issue of how technologies (both new and old) create meaning.

In contrast to the practical reasons underlying the study of book history, the pedagogical reasons are less often articulated.

The core pedagogical value of book history is that, as students are encouraged to think critically about texts and how they are 'made' and 'read', as well as how the form in which the text appears could affect its meaning, this action promotes a 'deep' approach to learning. This 'deep' approach to learning is, of course, a feature of Bloom's (1956) famous 'taxonomy of learning', which postulates a development from 'surface' to 'deep' learning - from knowledge reproduction and comprehension, to application and
analysis, through to synthesis and evaluation. One of the factors influencing a 'surface' approach to learning is students seeing their work as irrelevant, whereas perceived relevance of course material - with applications in related courses, professional practice or everyday life - promotes a 'deep' approach to learning. As was noted above, book history has important applications in these areas. Perhaps the most important lesson it can deliver to students - applicable in all three areas: related courses, professional practice and everyday life - is that 'the nature of the medium has a critical impact on the way we engage with the knowledge being mediated' (Laurillard, 2004, p. 77). Book history empowers students to take responsibility for what they know and how they come to know it; it promotes a shift from the oftentimes 'surface' study of content, to a 'deeper' study of the processes involved in creating and receiving that content.

On a related note, the study of book history lends itself to what educationalists term 'performative' understanding: students will be able to apply their understanding to other situations (Biggs, 2003). The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), a division of the American Library Association, drafted a document that interrogates this type of understanding by identifying the research skills a student should possess at the completion of an English course; similar to 'performative' understanding, these are so-called 'generic' skills that can be applied in a variety of situations. The document, titled 'Research Competency Guidelines for Literatures in English', lists such common skills as the ability to 'differentiate between primary and secondary sources', which is given an airing in almost every English unit no matter its subject focus or theoretical bent (Baker, Pavy, & Reynolds, 2007). However, it includes other research skills to which book history makes a special contribution; for example,

Understand the authorship, production, dissemination, or availability of literary production. This includes understanding the meanings and distinctions of the concepts of editions, facsimiles, and authoritative editions. (Baker, Pavy, & Reynolds, 2007)

The ability to 'understand the authorship, production, dissemination, or availability of literary production' is a clear example of 'performative' understanding, in that this understanding is relevant in a great variety of situations (for example, related courses and professional practice). Furthermore, it is a hallmark of the study of book history.

Conclusion

Staff in the discipline of English and Cultural Studies at UWA - perhaps like staff in similar disciplines in other Australian universities - are generally familiar with the field of book history and have some awareness of specific trends and recent achievements in the field. However, they are not making this area of study available to their students.

'Reflective practice' is a well-acknowledged factor in the improvement of teaching and learning, with pioneering work on this subject done by Schön as early as 1983, but the results of the aforementioned questionnaire and interviews would seem to indicate that this practice is not being employed with respect to book history. After all, the first step in 'reflective practice' is

setting the problem [which] involves two stages, naming (an understanding of the situation is developed and the 'things' to which the practitioner will attend are named) and framing the problem (boundaries are established, and a 'logic' or discipline is created for the problem, defining the context in which the named things will be attended). (Pereira, 1999, p. 342)

By practicing contextualist criticism and raising issues of book history (especially in their lectures) but not identifying these practices to their students, staff are flaunting this very first step of 'reflective practice'. 'Naming' and 'framing' these practices - in other words, making these practices explicit - is the
first step towards a more comprehensive 'reflective practice', thereby potentially opening up a unique realm of practical and pedagogical advantages afforded by the study of book history. Clearly, contextualist literary theory and, in particular, book history are well-suited to contemporary ideas about good teaching practice, as well as meeting expectations about the generic skills students should possess upon completion of a university course.

References


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[ Refereed papers ] [ Contents - All Presentations ] [ Home Page ]
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