

Taking Risks in Hands-On Outreach

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Abstract

This article discusses how Brigham Young University's L. Tom Perry Special Collections made the decision to put a roughly \$60,000 book into the hands of thousands of students. It discusses the risks of allowing public access on a large scale to a book that many students and members of the local community would have an interest in, and how those risks were mitigated. Finally, the benefits of going against the grain of traditional librarianship, such as enhancing the library's role as a community hub, are evaluated.

Keywords: *special collections; academic library; library outreach; rare books; book conservation*



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Introduction

In 2015, I was hired by Brigham Young University's L. Tom Perry Special Collections (LTPSC) in the Harold B. Lee Library (HBLL) as the curator of 19th and 20th Century Western Americana and Mormon Books. One of my main priorities was countering the perception that special collections was not a space for students. There were no specific indicators that this was a problem, but library administrators began a library-wide initiative to better serve BYU's undergraduates began in 2015. Several thousand students were already using special collections materials or had visited special collections for lectures and presentations, but during the question-and-answer interview sessions before I was hired, teaching faculty from other university departments and colleges specifically mentioned a concern that BYU students did not receive significant hands-on learning experiences with LTPSC materials.

LTPSC curators have long recognized the value of class presentations and the importance of serving undergraduates in addition to more traditional patrons. While many curators created presentations specific to a particular course that incorporated hands-on learning, the overall tone set by the more senior special collections faculty and administrators strongly discouraged handling of special collections materials. This was exhibited during class presentations they gave in the special collections classroom. The materials they used to describe our holdings were selected to awe students, not to engage with them. A single page from a Gutenberg Bible, a gorgeous, heavily decorated illuminated manuscript bible, and a Book of Hours produced for a French noblewoman were among the items used in the most commonly given "show and tell" by special collections employees. While the curator would open the books and turn pages during these presentations, they wore white cotton gloves and refused to allow students to touch the books—sending a subtle message that students were not truly welcome in special collections.

After I was hired, I discussed this problem with my colleagues and reviewed the professional literature related to hands-on activities in academic special collections. I found that actively putting special collections materials in the hands of undergraduates could create powerful experiences.¹ Many BYU students identify themselves as members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (often called Mormons). LTPSC holds six copies of the first edition of the foundational book of the Mormon experience, the Book of Mormon, first published in 1830 and considered scripture by Latter-day Saints. First edition copies of the Book of Mormon regularly sell for well over \$50,000 at auction, and copies in exceptional condition or with significant provenance can change hands at over \$100,000.

I identified an 1830 Book of Mormon from our collection in very poor condition, and asked my library's conservators to repair it such that it could survive routine handling by students. Before doing so, I spoke separately with my department chair and the associate university librarian for special collections about my plan to give students the opportunity to hold an 1830 Book of Mormon.² Both were hesitant to support this idea since it went against traditional practice, but both also stated that the decision was mine to make. Of course, their stance meant that anything that went wrong would be on my head.

With their somewhat reluctant sign-off, I approached the head of our conservation lab. She was initially somewhat amused that a curator was actually planning to have large numbers of students

¹ The literature on hands-on outreach in archives and special collections has grown in the last thirty years as the need for outreach has partially eclipsed preservation as a significant institutional concern. Primary source labs are one common method used to give students hands-on experiences with special collections materials. See Rosenkranz, A., Burrow, G., and Crane, L. (2016). Developing a Primary Source Lab Series: A Collaboration Between Special Collections and Subject Collections Librarians. In K. Totleben and L. Birrell (Eds.). *Collaborating for Impact: Special Collections and Liaison Librarian Partnerships*. (pp. 163-186). Chicago: ACRL/ALA; Williams, P. (2016). What is Possible: Setting the Stage for Co-Exploration in Archives and Special Collections. In N. Pagowsky and K. McElroy (Eds.), *Critical Library Pedagogy Handbook, Volume 1: Essays and Workbook Activities* (pp. 111-120). Chicago: ACRL Press.

² LTPSC is a department within the Harold B. Lee Library. The department chair reports to the associate university librarian, who then reports to the university librarian, the head of the library.

handle a rare and valuable book, contrary to longstanding LTPSC principles, but she was also intrigued by the challenge of preparing the book for long-term regular use. Her team carefully repaired the book with handling in mind. First, they removed what little was left of the old spine, detaching it and the cover boards. Surviving backstrip leather was carefully set aside. A new spine was created using a flexible, high-quality, acid-free buckram, and the original backstrip leather was laid back down over it. The original boards were not in bad shape, so they were gently cleaned and attached to the new spine. Internally, the conservation team made several tissue repairs and added a new front end page to protect the title page.

Risks

The risks associated with this project were layered in several significant ways. At the level of preservation, books are best kept alive by minimizing handling. Allowing the public to handle any book increases the danger of someone accidentally or purposely damaging, or even attempting to steal the book. The potential for someone to behave badly must always be recognized. I planned to mitigate this risk by having a curator and one or two security personnel present when the book is being handled. That being said, I recognized that “security personnel” in this case would likely mean undergraduate students with some training, a uniform, and a walkie-talkie, so they would be unlikely to tackle someone trying to run off with the book (I suppose that’s my job).

Each time a patron opens the repaired 1830 Book of Mormon, the pages and covers receive a miniscule amount of wear. Over time, this will destroy the book. Though it is almost always handled only after library patrons clean their hands, dirt and oils will inevitably begin to build up. This risk is seriously mitigated by two solutions. First, patrons are taught how to handle the book (i.e., how to open it, how far it can be opened, and how to turn the pages gently) before they ever touch it. The second mitigating factor is the skill of the HBLL’s conservation team. Even if the book sustains page

tears and cover wear, these can be repaired. I also asked the conservation department to examine the book at yearly intervals so that other problems can be recognized and mitigated before they become disasters.

There was also a potentially significant risk to my plan to put the book in students' hands from the administrative side. Our special collections department had a longstanding tradition of keeping especially valuable books out of students' hands during presentations. While no policy dictated this approach, it was ingrained in most presentations given by special collections employees. Ironically, students could request to use one of the presentation books in our reading room with no issue. As a first-year faculty-track curator, going against department norms could easily poison my reputation going forward, or at least make the process more difficult.

Of course, LTPSC's administrators were taking a large chance of their own. They had to trust a wet-behind-the-ears curator's crazy plan to let students regularly handle an 1830 Book of Mormon. Any negative press from this event—such as a local newspaper or a popular blogger criticizing some aspect of it—would inevitably reflect poorly on their management. We were taking a chance that BYU students and other library patrons would approach opportunities to handle the book in good faith (in the regular sense, not the religious one!).

National Archives Month

The repaired book's first test occurred in October 2015. Each year in October, libraries, archives, and special collections all over the United States celebrate National Archives Month by reaching out to the public and hosting events that bring in people who do not normally use archival resources. Archives Month events at BYU are planned by a committee of special collections curators and other employees, such as reference staff and the department secretary. Typical events include a tour of campus accompanied by a special collections employee who narrates ghost stories along the

way; a “make your own clay tablet” event (meant to bring attention to a Sumerian tablet from ca. 1900 B.C. held by LTPSC in a child-friendly way); a two-hour open-house by the library’s conservation team where they answered questions about how to preserve or repair family books, photographs, and other objects; and guest lectures on topics related to archive and special collections themes.

LTPSC’s Archives Month committee plans and carries out these events. It is made up of a rotating group of special collections employees, including several curators.³ In August 2015, the committee asked me to consider hosting a “hold an 1830 Book of Mormon” event. As a newly hired curator, I was hesitant to potentially offend administrators who might look poorly on allowing the general public to hold a difficult-to-replace book. Because the HBLL holds six copies of the 1830 Book of Mormon, however, I argued that allowing students and visitors to look through the repaired copy would be appropriate. Many students and members of the local community come from LDS backgrounds, and the opportunity to hold and look through an 1830 Book of Mormon represented an opportunity to make a positive connection to LTPSC and the rest of the library.

In planning for the Archives Month event, I made sure that library security would be present and also arranged the location—a piece of prime real estate on the main floor of the HBLL. The Archives Month committee worked with the library’s marketing and outreach group to advertise the planned two-hour “Hold a Book of Mormon” event on the library and university calendars, and posters advertising the event were posted around campus.

The day of the event came at last. To prepare students, faculty, and other potential visitors from the community while they waited in line, I coordinated with the book conservators to have them present during the event. Before patrons came anywhere near the book, the library’s conservators

³ LTPSC curators include both archivists and librarians.

went over the basics of how to hold a rare book without damaging it and gave each person a disposable (non-book-damaging) hand wipe. When the person reached the front of the line, I introduced them to the book, reviewed again how to hold it to avoid damaging it, and then put it in their hands.

Interest was incredibly strong. While not the most successful event ever put on by the library in terms of raw head count, 150 library patrons had the opportunity to hold the book in 2015. This count would be much higher if I had attempted to hurry visitors along to any degree, but I hoped that having a few moments to look at the book and turn its pages would lead to a more memorable experience. We also had student library employees available to take pictures using the patron's phone, leading to some great tweets and Facebook posts each year. In 2015, the line went over 100 feet from the handling station to outside of the library. We succeeded in giving the general student population and visitors from off-campus the opportunity to not only hold a significant rare book, but to learn how to properly handle it. More importantly, by encouraging even the freshest of 1st-year university students (or anyone else) to hold it, we send the message that special collections is for everyone.

The success of the event went a long way toward vindicating my approach. The event received coverage in local media, and my administrators heard nothing but positive comments from outside faculty and administrators. While this event did not change the culture of special collections overnight, it signaled a shift in library priorities towards our patrons. I have since used the book in dozens of class presentations, as well as during similar National Archives Month events in 2016 and 2017.

While I still question my sanity in allowing hundreds of random people to look through a roughly \$60,000 book each year, we continue to host this event each year. Each time, we set up in an open space on the main floor of the library reasonably close to the entrance (and to security!), and each time the line eventually goes out the door. In addition to National Archives Month events, I use the

book in roughly 20 one-shot teaching sessions for classes on early Mormon history, religious history, and the history of the book each year. These events have created substantial goodwill towards the library. Faculty who send their students to attend report overwhelmingly positive feedback and higher teacher evaluations. Since 2015, the repaired copy has gone through over 3,600 students' hands with only one minor page tear.

Conclusion

While archives and libraries all over the world often take chances in a variety of ways, I am not aware of any event put on by an institution that encourages the public to hold and look through an extremely valuable book with no strings attached. Despite the continuing risk of damage to the book and the potential for theft, the administrative risk associated with the activity has actually flipped—now my department chair expects to see a “Hold an 1830 Book of Mormon” activity during Archives Month each year, and professors from all over campus—including Computer Science faculty!—have expressed interest in trips to special collections to work with our materials.⁴

Without an internal drive to improve our outreach to students and an external push from teaching faculty to provide students with more hands-on experiences with special collections materials, this experiment likely would have faced stiffer opposition at the outset. Rather than digitizing the 1830 Book of Mormon to distribute it, my approach recognized the power of books as artifacts, as carriers of culture as well as knowledge, and as physical objects with histories separate

⁴ Specifically, one Computer Science professor was teaching a User Interface design course and wanted his students to broaden their understanding of what an interface is and what kinds of things can be done. Another brought his class in and spoke about books in the context of creating a simple cataloging program. Both professors became interested in using Special Collections materials after they heard about the Archives Month event.

from the information contained within. This is hardly a novel approach to rare book librarianship, but it does cut against the idea that books are disposable, noted by Terry Belanger in 2003.⁵

I hope my experience demonstrates several principles worth considering. First, if your institution holds more than one example of a particular book or artifact with significant importance to local culture(s) or history, consider hosting an event from time to time that allows your patrons to interact with it in a sustainable and meaningful way. Not every book or document can or should be handled, but working within institutional guidelines can lead to creative outcomes. Second, when hosting any event where rare materials are present, make sure that all parties involved are prepared well ahead of time. Making security arrangements and taking up prime library walking space for two hours requires careful coordination with several different departments in the HBLL. Third, do not underestimate (or overestimate) the ability of the public to carefully handle an object. While I need to step in to adjust the way someone is holding the book from time to time, no one has ever held it in such a way that I felt a need to rescue the book. Finally, understand the risks you are taking. When I bring the 1830 Book of Mormon out for library visitors to hold, I understand that I am slowly decreasing the life span of the book. Each time it is opened, each time a page is turned, the book is wearing out. Someday we will need to make a change, but I hope to continue putting rare materials in the hands of people who appreciate them for as long as I can.

⁵ Terry Belanger. (Summer 2003). Special Collections in the Twenty-First Century. *Library Trends* 52 (1), 183-195. https://www.ideals.illinois.edu/bitstream/handle/2142/8513/librarytrendsv52i1r_opt.pdf