

# Beyond the Podium Podcast with Neil Weijer

## Teaching with Special Collections

### **SPEAKERS**

Alexandra Bitton-Bailey, Neil Weijer

#### **Alexandra Bitton-Bailey 00:08**

Hello, my name is Alexandra Bitton-Bailey Welcome to the teaching Beyond the Podium Podcast series. This podcast is hosted by the Center for Teaching Excellence at the University of Florida. Our guests share their best tips, strategies, innovations and stories about teaching. This episode, we'll explore using library special collections as a course tool for experiential learning. Today, we have the great pleasure of chatting with UF's official treasure hunter, nowhere, Neil's days are filled with discovery and adventure as he navigates the aisles of the UF rare books and special collections. I was fascinated by what exactly is the UF special collection, Neil explained, and in doing so shared his enthusiasm, expertise, and deep love of rare books.

#### **Neil Weijer 01:13**

I'm Neal, where I'm the curator of UF's. I should just say I'm the curator of UF's, Harold and Mary Jean Hanson rare book collection, the official name, but it's about 70,000 books, objects ephemera from the High Middle Ages to the present day. So it's kind of the asked me everything collection within our special collections. And there are a number of different ones in the Department of Special Collections at the Smathers libraries. I tell students, the best part of my job is that every time I go down one of those aisles, I learn something new, because I find books that I have never seen before or in some cases I never knew existed. Looking through a library that's organized by those kinds of categories of knowledge. It's also kind of terrifying, because, you know, as an academic, you're kind of taught to say, This is my area of expertise, this is what I know really well. And then you know, everything else is not really my field. But as a curator, you have to kind of understand at least a little bit about how the collection as a whole fits together. And I mean, the good thing about them is that whenever you put them together, we call them special collections. Because you know, some of them are old. Some of them are very rare. Some of them, a lot of them need special handling, they can't just sit on circulating shelves. But what really makes them powerful is being able to put combinations of them together in a room and have people just experience them look at things from different time periods in different subjects and actually make connections in real time. Because that's what happens every time you know, the books come out. That's what they're for. There are lots of ways that the collections have mattered to different departments in the university, different people who've made or own the books across time. So really, I mean, there's no limit to the number of ways that the collections can impact.

#### **Alexandra Bitton-Bailey 03:08**

Neil magically found himself in a special collection, where he quickly became enamored with special collections and the impact they can have on students.

**Neil Weijer 03:20**

So I was looking at the ways that people believed history in origin history that in the case of medieval England, we all knew wasn't true. As a historian, I wasn't studying it to learn about whether King Arthur was a real person, I was studying it to look at what somebody in the 15th century, would have thought about when they heard that name, or when they thought about the history of this country they called England. And the only way that I could do that was by looking at the books that people had made and used at the time. And individually, there are about 200 manuscripts of this history that survived, which is, you know, often people say second to the copies of the Bible or something like that. It's an insane number of books for a text like this. But looking at them, kind of made it impossible to ignore the fact that the books themselves have lives. They had stories, they had histories. And that was what I was really interested in understanding, looking at the ways that these things have been put together and kept by libraries and preserved by collectors and sometimes scribbled on by children. It really opened my eyes to what I could study. And then also what I could do as a student as an academic, and then you know, now as a curator. There are all these kind of like weird, you're talking about, you know, the medievalism or medieval studies being this kind of amalgamation of lots of different things. Well, you know, curation is kind of this same way, you're, you're part, Detective, you're part librarian, you're part scholar, you're part book nerd, just, you know, it'd be ended sort of what comes out of all these things,

**Alexandra Bitton-Bailey 05:13**

Neal discovered, not only a fascination for the treasures held in those collections, in fact, he actually found a brand new professional direction for his work. That changed his entire career path.

**Neil Weijer 05:30**

So when I was a junior in college, and I was starting to study this, this area, this idea of, of national history and origin stories, my advisor said to me, we have these two copies of this medieval manuscript in our school library, you should go and look at them. And as an undergraduate, I just kind of sat there and nodded my head. But I was thinking, No, that's not possible. Those don't exist here. They don't belong in you know, in this case, in Chicago, they belong in a museum somewhere in Europe. And even if they weren't here, I shouldn't just be able to like, go to the library, give them my library card and check out a 600 year old book. But that was, with the exception of the checking out, that was exactly what happened. And so and yeah, that reaction is the same that all of our students get when they know that, you know, this collection, all of these books are there for them. That's why this whole thing is here. And if you find out about that, when you were a first year undergraduate, and your faculty member brings you into a course, or you walk into the library, and you see somebody doing something with these materials, you're gonna be able to do a lot more with them than if you discover it, you know, kind of late in your undergraduate career or Yeah, or in many cases, not at all. So yeah, I mean, I think that introduction and the fact that it wouldn't have happened, if there weren't, you know, really nice librarians and graduate students that helped me understand what I was seeing in these collections. And that made me feel welcome. It really makes teaching, especially teaching undergraduates very special to me, because I have to tell them, you know, like I said, every, every class that I teach, I tell them that these collections, these materials are here for them. But then I have to make sure that's actually true. That they can they have the skills and the confidence to actually do what they want with these, these materials.

**Alexandra Bitton-Bailey 07:40**

When Neal first ventured into special collections, he was told by the librarian that the collection was there for the students, and all materials were actually available to them. Now, he loves helping students get to know the collection, explore and discover how they can use it. As an educator, he helps students find pieces that speak to them best.

**Neil Weijer 08:08**

Often, what happens is, first, during those kinds of first encounters with a collection, or with a book, what they're experiencing what they're learning is actually how to pick apart the book or the artifact or the archive as an object, you know, to think about who put it together? And how and why. And all the questions that they really need, if they're, you know, pursuing those topics academically. And then it becomes the question of saying, how do you bring your own self into this, this picture? And that might be saying, if you open a book, or an object, you could have noticed any one of a dozen things? Why did you key off on the cover? Or why did you notice that little detail that somebody put on page five? What is it about your own background, your own experience, your own desire that kind of leads you to see and think of these things are important. Because if they're interesting to you, they're probably interesting to somebody else. And that's, you know, that experience, can take the form of small essays, descriptive writing, about a book, it can actually take the form of creative writing or creative making. You can use what you see to inspire people to actually make, you know, make new things. And then it can also lead to things like exhibitions and digital humanities projects. But it's not just the book. It's not just the thing that you're showing them. It's also the story of the project. It's the story of you as the researcher, all of those things come together. And that's really I mean, that's the ultimate goal for students to feel comfortable enough through all those experiences that they've had that they can just go Go and find something and do something new with it. Without having all this, you know, without having somebody looking over their shoulder saying, oh, you know, you're misreading that.

**Alexandra Bitton-Bailey 10:11**

Neil offers some valuable recommendations for getting started with the collection.

**Neil Weijer 10:17**

The best way to start is to have a conversation with somebody else, whether that's a faculty mentor, or whether that's one of us, you know, the sooner we can start thinking about, you know, collaboratively, what can be made, the better it's going to be. And I will say that, you know, if people have a goal in mind, and that goal might just be, I want my students to be able to see and understand the amount of labor it took to get this type of knowledge into people's hands, you know, that it wasn't just instantaneous and universally applicable, all the way up to, I want my students to start their own digital projects highlighting this, this facet of the collections that might not be represented. Those are great. And they're discrete goals, and we can build from them. But the more time that we give, and the more time that they actually give their students to appreciate and process what they're seeing, the better the outcome is going to be. Because, you know, I know, we've all been there in seminars where you've put a lot of information in front of people, and then asked, Oh, hey, what do you guys? What do you think about this? And, yeah, that's never gonna go super well.

**Alexandra Bitton-Bailey** 11:41

One way to help students get started is to give them the space to play and explore, it often

**Neil Weijer** 11:48

starts with that that single visit of you know, a faculty member says, or we say to a faculty member, hey, we've got some really great materials that your students would love. If they're, you know, reading in this period, like, let's say, it's really medicine, let's say it's Victorian studies, or almanacs, and like sort of cheap print culture in the 20th century, I love working with that stuff. You know, it's just first they kind of say, Oh, well, this, it'll be great for students just to know that it's there. And then what we do after that is kind of say, well, it's best if it starts early. And it's best if it's, if it's sustained. It's best if it's sustained, so that the students get the chance to really kind of reflect on what they've done. So for a project, even something like a little exhibition, or a little description, a display that the students create together, often, you know, we'll have one visit for them just to sort of take things in. And then another one that's more focused on actually doing the work, one of the best ways to start out with that is just by having them. You know, when I started doing research and special collections, there was no individual photography allowed, you had to like contact a library to get copies of a manuscript off of microfilm. So there were times when I'd be like, looking around an archive with my standalone digital camera and be like, is anybody looking at a picture this. And now that most you know, most archives, let you photograph things for your own research, and all of our phones have cameras on them. So the best way to start is just by having students, you know, explore a bunch of different materials and take a picture of one thing, and come back and reflect on that one thing, either in the class or as an assignment, and then kind of build from there. Because you have that tangible, that picture of saying, this is the thing that as this is what I saw. And then you just slowly build on the and this is what I think it means throughout the course, if you want.

**Alexandra Bitton-Bailey** 14:06

What are some of the challenges students or faculty might encounter?

**Neil Weijer** 14:12

When I started teaching with rare books, especially older ones, I had to contend really, really quickly with the fact that most undergraduates if you give them a book that is hundreds of years old, and written in Latin, and heavily abbreviated, you're teaching them something about an object that they can't read. And you have to be able to provide something that they can grab on to. And that's sort of the the lesson of all of these experiential learning courses and exercises. It's, you're trying to supply the scaffolding that will let a student do more and more stuff with a book and then see it as part of their own experience as part of their you know, entire education rather than just kind of a cool thing. They saw one.

**Alexandra Bitton-Bailey** 15:00

Working with the collection is a very unique experience for both the students and teachers.

**Neil Weijer** 15:08

One of my favorite things to teach, and one of my favorite things to have participated in our graduate seminars that actually bring people in across disciplines so that we're all looking at the same type of

material. But we've got very, very different experiences from the, you know, from the students, from the curators, from the instructors, from the faculty, and it helps people see that there is no one way to read a book. And there's no one way to get excited about a book, the best ideas are going to come from faculty, students from people who don't necessarily, you know, think about these essential they don't, they're not thinking about the material is central to what they're doing at first. But then they say, Well, wait a minute, I can, I can use this, this makes sense to me, this part of it makes sense to me. Yeah. And then that's what they take and move forward with. And that's the kind of thing that we'd love to see, come back, because it means those collections, it means the collections have a life, I you know, I really do hope that people kind of feel comfortable bringing their ideas out. And knowing that like, they don't have to have everything completely set. You know, we can help kind of fill in, fill in the details, and really worked together to make something cool.

**Alexandra Bitton-Bailey 16:33**

Neil has had some incredibly memorable moments, teaching.

**Neil Weijer 16:39**

So one of my favorites here. And actually it's it's been going on since the pandemic, since we started using more, you know, images in the, in the collections, there's a group that's come in just this past week. And they started working with periodicals from the 19th century. So newspapers, almanacs, all these things that kind of orbited around their major literary figures they're studying. And they're doing this version of an exercise that the professor and I designed, where they start with a picture, and then we're starting to teach them how to write exhibit labels. So there's 30 students in this class, they're going to narrow these things down to about half, and they're going to rework what they've originally submitted. And so in the end, we'll have a little digital exhibit of these, this Victorian print culture, periodical culture that the students will have made from their own background knowledge, and even just seeing kind of what they've taken and how they've described it initially. It's, it's amazing, because you see things that you can't, in a million years, you would never thought to do. Another one of my favorites has been over the summer, we had a master's level workshop in Art Education come in. And this group was doing a large print installation. So they were looking at different types of printed material from modern art works to, you know, early modern books. And I showed them one of the earliest treatises on human anatomy. It was used to teach people how to draw but it was also used to teach people how to do surgery, from the 16th century on photos are incredibly, incredibly famous and vibrant book. And one of the students, as they were practicing drawing, they were making these little zines to help kind of conceptualize what their part of this bigger artwork was going to look like. But then also just to work on translating what they were going to, you know, what they were taking from the materials they'd seen. And the student actually took one of these diagrams and turned it into a poster, like on the back of his fold out, zine, it was incredible. And I think that's probably like a life goal. For me. I was like, I wanted somebody to take this incredibly specialized, incredibly beautiful medical book, and do something with it that nobody else has done before. And that, you know, no academic I don't think is going to you know, is going to work on that. So, I think those are the kinds of things that because we have such a wide range of skills and talents and specializations here. There's really no limit to what people can do if they're given the time and the support.

**Alexandra Bitton-Bailey 19:41**

If you're interested or curious, you can always reach out to Neal to design activities to help students jump into the collections.

**Alexandra Bitton-Bailey** 19:57

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