

## Teaching Bibliography in Lyon

The library that I work at is very small; we have a staff of three. I do a little of everything: I catalogue backlog, including a collection of medieval manuscript leaves; I help with exhibit curation and mounting; and I help the current printing fellows with seminars teaching graduate students about letterpress printing. The thing about teaching, though, is that if you don't do it often, you tend to lose your edge. I am by and large a self-taught instructor; I have learned to teach by watching people teach me and deciding what I like and what I don't. So, when I saw a scholarship available to take a whole course focused on teaching bibliography with rare materials, I jumped on it. The fact that it was in Lyon, France, arguably one of the most interesting places for a letterpress printer to be, was the icing on top of the cake.

After the news that I had received the SHARP New Scholar Bursary sunk in, I managed easily to find a flight from Toronto and a place to stay in Lyon close to the Musée de l'imprimerie, which would serve as the home base for the course. Without the scholarship, these costs would have been insurmountable. Before the course started, our instructor, Professor Neil Harris, sent us some homework and also the intriguing task of selecting a poem to set and print on the final day of the course. Upon arrival in Lyon, we registered at the Musée, and the next day arrived at the Enssib (École nationale supérieure des sciences de l'information et des bibliothèques) for the first lesson.

From this point on, it was obvious that this course wouldn't be running traditionally. Given blindfolds and instructed to sit in front of a book, we had to describe what we felt in front of us. I had a trade paperback copy of a James Bond novel; one of my classmates had a sheet of A4 paper. This spurred a discussion about how to grab students' attention and how to emphasize that everything and anything can be a jumping off point to discuss bibliography, even a blank sheet of paper. Unlike the other classes being held at Lyon, that was our only session at *Enssib* – we then visited the library at the École normale supérieure de Lyon, the Bibliothèque municipale de Lyon, the Archives municipales de Lyon, and the library of the Université catholique de Lyon, with afternoon sessions at the Musée de l'imprimerie. We learned by teaching each other – each student would introduce a book to the class, and the class would act like a potential audience, be it elementary school students, a job interview panel, or, amusingly, a group of American Bible enthusiasts on a tour of Europe.

This method taught us to think on our feet, and to see the immediate effects of what worked and what didn't. Throughout our presentations, Professor Harris taught us about difficult books, about building our personal teaching collections, and used watermarks as a case study to illustrate the difference between showing off a book and teaching real bibliography. In particular, I did not have very much experience with using watermarks in a professional context, much less a teaching one, and I appreciated this particular example as something that would be useful in my work.

We learned not only about time management, improvisation, acting, and teaching, but also about the history of books in Lyon and the Lyonnais contribution to book history. It would have been impossible not to – the effects of early Lyonnais printing are present in every library and archive that we visited.

For me, this emphasis on a geographical area and time period I am less familiar with (I'm a medievalist who specializes in English history) was particularly valuable, as was the exposure to my fellow students, whose interests and knowledge shone through in all of their talks. Professor Harris's emphasis on learning teaching through experiencing teaching resonated with my own professional experience. The more you teach, the better you get at it, and the more variety of materials you teach with, the more adaptable you become.

As I go forward in my work, I go with more confidence in my teaching abilities, and with some new specific tips and tricks for keeping students engaged. As I help students in our program put together their own seminars, I hope to be able to help our students learn to teach in a similar way – through experience and trial and error. I look at objects less for their intrinsic value, but more as teaching objects – I certainly can't look at a piece of A4 paper the same way again! My time in Lyon provided a necessary change in perspective for me and allowed me to practice a skill I don't get to use as often as I would like in my professional practice.

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July 2017