

From Wow to Wondering: Proposed Solutions to Alienating Awe in the Special Collections & Archives Classroom

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Abstract:

As instructors in the Florida State University Libraries Special Collections & Archives Classroom, we regularly encounter moments of wonder when students make contact with ancient artifacts, mysterious manuscripts, or ornate art pieces. Often, the awe that arises provokes interest and inquiry, but it can also distance the budding researcher from collection materials and halt classroom momentum. While wonder is a positively valenced emotion, it can interfere with critical engagement and productive use of materials that dazzle the viewer in one way or another. As we've grown our instruction program, we've been investigating this question: how can we encourage students to navigate beyond the "wow" and view historical texts as resources rich for critical thinking and deep research? In this presentation, we will explore how instructors and students can collapse the barrier of awe and sustain momentum to engage in productive wonderment. First, we will consider what factors in archival or museum engagement might shut down the critical mind in favor of simple amazement. Second, we extol the virtues of this reaction. For undergraduates especially, this emotional response can make an onerous task like writing about an archival or museum object feel exciting and motivating. Finally, we propose approaches that can encourage more thoughtful encounters. Because archives can be daunting places for new researchers, our goal is to minimize this distance as much as possible by employing new pedagogical practices: active learning classroom experiences, pre-work assignments to cede expertise to students, and strategic selection of resource sets.

About the authors:

Taylor F. Henning is the University Archivist at Florida State University (FSU) in Tallahassee, Florida. In this position, she is responsible for selecting, acquiring, appraising, arranging, describing, and promoting access to records and materials documenting the rich history of FSU. She also fields reference requests, provides research consultations, curates exhibits, contributes to instruction services, and leads other outreach activities. In her research, Taylor examines the affective experiences of students in the primary source literacy instruction classroom. At FSU, Taylor received a Master of Arts in German Studies and a Bachelor of Arts in German and International Affairs. She earned her MS/LIS at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

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