

# Anthology: Papers from “The Power of New Voices”

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## Editor’s Note:

*The following essays originally appeared as lightning talk presentations during the RBMS annual conference. The Power of New Voices (PONV) is an annual conference session featuring the work of early-career individuals, defined as five years post-Master’s. Developed in response to calls for broader representation and opportunity for emerging voices after the 2019 RBMS conference, and through collaboration between then-Committee Co-chairs Elspeth Healey and Katie Henningsen (Scholarships), Diane Dias De Fazio and Erika Jenns (Membership & Professional Development), and Francesca Marini (Diversity); PONV debuted in 2021 and was co-organized by Gina Nortonsmith and Meghan Constantinou, and a sub-committee comprised of former scholarship recipients Sara Schliep, Kathryn Whalen, Sarah Allison, and Rachel Makarowski. In advance of this volume, nineteen PONV panelists were contacted to submit essays to RBM. Essays included herein reflect the brevity of the lightning talk format, were condensed from longer scholarship (including a Master’s-level thesis), and some apply first-person voice and future perfect tense intentionally.*

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## Practical Book History: Making an MLIS Practicum Work for Me

Anna Opryszko

Working in special collections is frequently a lesson in humility. In a profession that can cover many types of roles, with collections that cover every subject imaginable, and users from all walks of life, full mastery of every competency can’t be expected and is arguably impossible. But how does one move forward with their career when there is no clear path to learn a very particular, very important set of knowledge?

For special collections librarians who work in and with collections of rare books, having a basic proficiency in the history of the book is expected. The ACRL/RBMS Competencies for Special Collections Professionals include as a fundamental competency:

knowledge of the production and dissemination of information resources, including the history of the book and the book arts, book construction, editions and variants, binding history, illustration techniques, digital printing and publishing techniques, typefaces, paper, parchment, paleography, and scribal practices.<sup>1</sup>

Consider the types of materials that might be found in a rare books collection, and the role that special collections professionals hold as experts, in both content and materiality. It stands to reason, then, that gaining knowledge about materiality is necessary for early-career special collections librarians. What is less obvious is how to develop this type of knowledge when graduate programs in library science don't always offer courses in it. There are extracurricular options, but for those pursuing graduate degrees, accessing educational opportunities like Rare Book School can be difficult, costly, or simply out of the question.

This is where a practicum can play a valuable role. Practicums and internships can be essential, “not just for career exploration and future job placement, but for enhancing academic achievement, personal growth, and other positive educational outcomes.”<sup>2</sup> Practicums are often designed to teach skills in a “learning-by-doing” format, such as reference services or archival processing, and don't teach theoretical or historical knowledge. However, I believe there is great potential for graduate students to learn “practical book history,” that is, book history through a learning-by-doing process, in the structure of a practicum.

In early 2022, during my second year of my MLIS program, I discovered that I lacked a grounding in book history, a necessary requirement for the profession I saw myself pursuing. The following case study describes my experience designing a practicum to fill this gap.

I was employed full-time as Public Services Supervisor, a paraprofessional library assistant role, at the University of Minnesota's Wangenstein Historical Library, a collection with 73,000 rare books covering five centuries on the history of health and medicine. I felt lucky to be working full-time while pursuing my MLIS, and I assumed that I would never need to do a practicum. They weren't required in my program, and I thought that everything I'd need to know I could learn on the job. I had about ten years' experience working in libraries and nearly two graduate degrees:

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1. “Guidelines: Competencies for Special Collections Professionals,” *Association of College & Research Libraries Guidelines, Standards, and Frameworks*, last modified March 6, 2017, <https://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/comp4speccollect>.

2. Maggie Gallup Kopp, “Internships in Special Collections: Experiential Pedagogy, Intentional Design, and High-Impact Practice,” *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Cultural Heritage* 20, no. 1 (2019): 12, <https://doi.org/10.5860/rbm.20.1.12>.

my first, in American Studies, taught me how to perform historical research and what types of support graduate students need; and my MLIS showed me the foundations and theory behind much of my work experience. But I had no formal education in book history, nor was there a course available. This void in my education looked bigger with each instructional session I taught.

We taught a lot of classes at the Wagensteen: about seventy sessions every year, reaching 1,700 students from all academic disciplines. When they came to us, most students had never been to a special collections library before, or worked with rare books. But no matter who we worked with, or what the class topic was, students had questions about the materiality of these books. They asked me: Why does a page, or an illustration, or the binding, look the way it does? How can we know how and why the book was used, and by whom, and when? How is it printed? Why is this page uncut? Why is this word crossed out? And instructors weren't the ones initiating these questions, either: the students sincerely wanted to know. I started to realize how big that gap in my knowledge really was.

I designed a practicum with a specific and practical goal: I wanted to learn book history in a way that would be immediately applicable to our instructional program. I arranged to spend summer 2022 completing a practicum at the Wagensteen, my place of work, with the curator as the site supervisor. I decided to split my practicum into three "units." First, I focused on the scholarly side. I made a reading list for myself and absorbed as much as I could through books alone. I had already planned to attend a course at Rare Book School, so I used that to round off my "studying" unit. Next, I sought out new connections. I wanted to know how current rare books professionals applied their knowledge of book history to their professional practice; I wanted to see it in use. I explored digital exhibits, read Twitter threads, and reached out to a handful of people for informational interviews. Finally, I wanted to create some kind of public-facing output—an educational tool that we could provide students with, to wrap up this project, to get a good overview of what I had learned.

I developed a digital resource using ArcGIS StoryMaps that walked the user through major features of early printed books from Europe. The platform allows for an immersive experience that mimics the anticipation that comes from turning a page, so I found it effective as a digital surrogate. The process of creating the StoryMap developed resource-creation skills and reinforced my theoretical knowledge; by the end of my practicum I had created a tangible and accessible resource that could be freely shared.<sup>3</sup>

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3. Anna Opryszko. "The Wagensteen Unbound: a Book History Primer," <https://z.umn.edu/WagensteenUnbound>, August 21, 2022. My reading list for this project can be found at the end of the StoryMap, under the "Further Resources" heading.

Many early-career special collections professionals and paraprofessionals would benefit from dedicated time to learn or reinforce prior knowledge of book history, as well as MLIS students without immediate access to rare books or professional development opportunities. There are two main takeaways from my practicum that I think are achievable, and I hope are useful, for all.

First, there are many accessible introductory texts to bibliography and book history. If you're hoping to establish a solid baseline of knowledge, don't jump straight to Bowers or Gaskell: start with blog posts from your favorite rare books librarians, an overview like Sarah Werner's *Studying Early Printed Books 1450–1800: a Practical Guide*, or a very visual text like David Pearson's *Books as History: the Importance of Books Beyond their Texts*. Rare Book School's website includes advance reading lists from many of their classes, so find the topics that resonate most with your educational and professional goals, and explore the texts listed for relevant classes. If possible, advocate for building in time to read and learn. After all, as the ACRL/RBMS Competencies lay out, this knowledge is a fundamental part of being a special collections professional.

Second, this field is packed with expertise and so many of these experts are very generous with their time. Participating in formal mentorship programs, or building professional relationships at conferences, or in committees, can open opportunities to learn from others. I found it meaningful to connect with rare books professionals who were willing to share recommendations for books or lectures, who contextualized ways of incorporating book history into pedagogical practice, and who offered to foster further connections down the road.

I was in a unique position to do this practicum. I had the benefit of working full-time in a rare books collection, with a supervisor who allowed me free reign for this project, and who encouraged me to apply for a Rare Book School scholarship—well before creating this practicum—which allowed me to incorporate that experience into it. But it took being in a job that required new skills and that challenged me every day to see exactly what my formal education was missing. It's inevitable to have gaps in education, and, I think, it's inevitable to feel restricted within institutional expectations, but, in this instance, advocating for what I knew I needed to know, and expanding the bounds of what a practicum could be, allowed me to gain a truly practical set of skills.