Archival Research and Editing in the Early American Classroom

Theresa Strouth Gaul
Texas Christian University

Rita Felski's article in *Profession* 2008, "From Literary Theory to Critical Method," argues for the importance of considering the relations between "theory and practice, between visionary ideas and everyday activities" (112) in constructing courses for students. My interest in this paper is admittedly on the "practice[s]" and "everyday activities" that have comprised much of my own scholarly work but which were completely absent from my own graduate education: archival research, recovery work, and documentary editing. After teaching my first couple of graduate seminars, which were quite traditional in their conception (following the model of the graduate seminars I enrolled in), I made a decision to share my own experience with these practices with my students in future classes and to help them prepare in concrete ways for the kinds of work they are likely to do in their own careers. I was not imagining a full-fledged method course like the one Felski proposes but instead an integration of research and editing methods alongside critical/theoretical approaches and literary analysis. To this end, I have constructed a number of assignments to facilitate students' introduction to archival research, recovery, and editing. Since this transformation of my syllabi, my students have also seemed transformed in their enthusiasm and dedication to their projects, and I have been amazed at the increased quality of work they are producing.

My intent as a panelist will be to share my rationale for this approach and how I have put it into practice in the classroom. I'm well aware that I'm not the only one constructing these kinds of assignments or taking this kind of approach, so one of my goals for my participation on this panel would be to facilitate sharing amongst the panelists and audiences about assignments and approaches they have used in their classrooms. In addition, while I have primarily used these assignments in graduate classrooms, I would anticipate the discussion including ideas about how they can be transported to the undergraduate classroom or modified to address teaching opportunities or constraints at other institutions or levels.

My assignments include:

- Visits to local archives to view materials, talk with archivists, and get behind-the-scenes tours as possible. These visits are followed by concrete discussions of the rules and procedures of archives, the etiquette of approaching research librarians, etc.

- Assignments to enhance students' familiarity with digital archives: Options include: 1) Search newspaper databases (America's Newspapers, American Periodical Series) for notices, advertisements, or reviews of one of the novels we have read. What conclusions can you draw about early American readers, reading practices, or responses to the novel you've chosen? 2) Using the database North American Women's Letters and Diaries, draw some conclusions about women's reading habits; 3) Search for usages of the word "coquette" (or any other key term that you come across repeatedly) in North American Women's Letters and Diaries. How does what you read in women's letters and diaries affect your interpretation of the novel which employs those terms? 4) Search a newspaper database to find articles on a historical events or individuals referred to in a novel. How does reading those articles affect your interpretation of the novel? (example: Haitian revolution, spontaneous combustion, the American-Algerian war, Pocahontas, etc.)

- Sequenced assignments in documentary editing: 1) After reading the content of the University of Viriginai ADE website on editing, students transcribe and annotate a manuscript letter related

a collection of correspondence but not included in it (I provide a copy of the manuscript letter; we have already read the collection in class). After students submit their transcription, I create a packet of all the transcriptions, and in class we discuss the differences among them, the choices students made as editors, and the challenges they encountered. We also discuss whether that particular letter should have been included in the volume under consideration and how its inclusion/exclusion affects the volume as a whole. 2) Students are required to transcribe and annotate two letters from a microfilm of a manuscript collection. They also much must use digital databases to find published letters by the same individual to compare the editing conventions of early American periodicals versus today. 3) Next, students transcribe and annotate a letter of their choice from the microfilms of a massive manuscript collection. They also must write a headnote explaining the letter's significance. This assignment is intended to simulate the experience of working in an archive, being confronted by massive and disparate kinds of materials in a collection, and having to make meaning of them.

- Seminar project: an edition of correspondence. Students produce an edition of correspondence, including introduction, statement of editorial method, headnotes (if appropriate), transcriptions, annotations, and bibliography. I tell them about options at local archives, but many of them choose to pursue materials at other archives. The introduction for the edition must provide necessary background information and historical context for the letters and situate them in relation to contemporary scholarship on letter-writing. The introduction should be at least 10 pages, and total length may range from 30-40 pp.

- Seminar project: an edition of an early American novel. Students write an introduction for an out-of-print early American novel. Using electronic databases, students locate and read a pre-1835 novel which was either serialized in a newspaper or published in book form. The introduction (approximately 20 pp. in length) must 1) provide necessary background information on the novel's initial publication and its author, 2) argue for the novel's significance in relation to current critical concerns, 3) establish necessary historical contexts, and 4) present a critical analysis.