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Notes--Teaching the Skills of Documentary Editing

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Notes

A section dedicated to providing useful information to promote scholarship in the field.

Teaching the Skills of Documentary Editing
Ann R. Hawkins

As textual or documentary editors, we perform a range of tasks that translate exceptionally well into classroom practice. The kinds of materials that readers need from our editions are produced by the kinds of skills that our students need to succeed in their college coursework and professional lives. But just as the foundational work of editors has often been devalued by critics and theorists uninterested in where the texts they study come from, we have also overlooked the great benefit that students can gain from doing the work that editors do.

In this essay, I will overview briefly the kinds of assignments I have been incorporating into my classes with tremendous success over the past five years. In fact, of all the pedagogical techniques I have used over the last twenty years of teaching on the college level, the results I have seen from integrating the skills of documentary editing far surpass anything else I have tried for developing skills in critical reading, thinking, writing, and research.

Paying Attention to Specifics: the Groundwork of Editing

Teaching the skills of textual editing begins with helping students see the importance of specificity: specific words, meanings, contexts, and so on. In some ways this is little different from a literary critic’s use of variant texts to teach close reading, and in fact that is the way I started out. Early in my career I placed short texts that existed in two different states side-by-side so that students could learn the importance of connotation and especially close reading.

But in the intervening years, presenting paired texts has become an invaluable activity for teaching more than close reading—and I use a version of this activity in all my classes. One pairing juxtaposes two versions of Sir Thomas Wyatt’s poem with the first line “They flee from me”: one, a poem recorded in the Egerton manuscript in which Wyatt both transcribes and corrects copies of his poems (British Library MS 2711, fol. 26v); the other, a
posthumous publication of Wyatt’s poem in Tottel’s Miscellany (1557) entitled “The Lover showeth how he is forsaken of such as he sometime enjoyed.”

I do not offer a lecture on editorial theory or terminology; instead, in the two to three minutes I use to set up the students’ task (to collect variants and record them), I simply introduce terms as they become relevant. Students use the information about the origins of our texts to determine a copytext; for future reference we name both texts according to a shorthand the students determine (frequently, text “a” and “b”); then students collate variants using a standard formula. After the students, working in groups, identify all the variants, we go over their results very quickly: sometimes just by asking the class as a whole what variants there are in a specific line (until we work through the whole poem), or by asking groups to write their discoveries for a particular line on the blackboard, then going over that material when it’s all recorded. Once we have the data we need, students move to the next step of their work in groups: determining how those variants influence meaning. Some variants are fairly easy to analyze like the shift from “strange” to “bitter” between the manuscript and printed version; others are more difficult to consider like the implications of added punctuation in the printed version.

As students come back together as a class, we discuss the poems both individually and as companions: which one they find more interesting and why; what they think happens to the poem when it moves from manuscript to print; and which contexts would encourage an editor to reproduce one version or the other.

Ultimately, this activity helps us talk about the purpose of an edition and the choices that editors face. If the editor is interested in bringing to light a poem closer to Wyatt’s original, then that editor might privilege the Egerton version existing in a manuscript commonplace book. But if the editor is interested in Wyatt’s reputation and reception among readers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, then the editor would likely privilege the printed text with greater circulation. The Wyatt pairing allows us to think about the idea of authorship, different forms of production and circulation (manuscript and print); the influence of class on those forms; the rise of printing and its influence on literary production; the nature of reception across literary-historical periods, and so on.

This activity from instructions to discussion usually takes thirty to forty minutes. But it is time well spent: students not only learn to pay attention to specifics when reading, but they gain both important theoretical under-
standing—how texts are unstable, what editors do, how particular versions are significant for particular historical contexts—and practical knowledge—what a copytext is, how editors identify them, what collation is, how to describe variants in a collation formula (and by extension, how to read a collation formula), and the difference between substantives and accidentals.

One can duplicate this activity with a variety of texts for a range of historical or literary periods, as long as one has enough variants in a brief section that students will find the comparison (and contrasts) compelling. And it is even better that students encounter for themselves the problems that editors face; and how texts are transformed from the messy versions that editors encounter to the neatly presented versions in their textbooks.

**Annotating Texts**

I integrate annotation into my classes to help students engage with texts more richly and thoughtfully. In lower-division classes this annotation takes two forms: writing marginalia and writing annotative notes. When we begin, students typically articulate the difference between marginalia as being self-directed, notes marking places the student finds interesting or troubling or problematic, whereas annotative notes are more externally directed, to a reader who is often imagined as a student in the class.

But the line between marginalia and reader-directed annotative notes becomes more blurry as students examine historical examples of marginalia both in our rare books collection and in online exhibitions. In their reflective writing on why and how readers have written in texts, students often articulate that marginalia is sometimes a self-motivated notation and sometimes an explanatory notation for subsequent readers. This requires students to imagine books as commodities that have long lives and multiple readers speaking to each other in the margins. One can make a useful comparison here to the used book market, and typically at least one student will admit to looking through the used books to try to find a “smart” previous owner, preferably one with lecture notes written in the margins and the name of the instructor recorded somewhere on the flyleaf.

After reflecting on the kinds of comments readers make in the margins, students read Mortimer Adler’s “How to Mark a Book,” then develop their own systems of marginalia in a textbook they mark as a course requirement. Though for past generations of students, marking or interleaving texts was a common assignment, my students are largely opposed to writing in books, perceiving them as more valuable than they are in their million copy print.
runs, and trained from public-school experience that writing in a book will get them in trouble. As a result, they are often poorer readers than they ought to be—and getting them to mark a book makes a huge difference. Certainly, writing marginalia is not in itself a skill of scholarly editing. But the intellectual work that students engage in—marking, for example, things they do not know—helps them imagine themselves, the book, and subsequent readers in a sort of conversation.

Having written in their books and thought carefully about the goals of such writing, students then go a step further to annotate a text for their classmates. We typically divide a text into parts corresponding to our class discussion, and, our student-annotator becomes the resident expert when we discuss his or her section in class. Students are responsible for identifying items they believe other students will need more information about—and they are often asked in our subsequent class discussions to justify those choices. To make things fair and to ensure that students do not just annotate one particular kind of item (such as simply defining words from the Oxford English Dictionary or other relevant dictionary), I offer some requirements: students have to annotate a proper name; a historical or cultural idea or event; a place; and so on.

Students then research (in reputable resources) their items and write clear, concise and appropriate annotations. Since students typically choose items they themselves do not know about, it’s reasonable to allow students to locate general answers on the Internet. And I allow this explicitly because doing so allows me to talk about authoritative resources and how to confirm the information they find on the Internet.

It is important to spend some time talking about how to use humanities resources for research. Faculty often forget that English and history majors are the ones most likely to have placed out of freshman composition—and as a result, however bright they are, they often feel at a loss in negotiating the research process, not to mention the library itself. Even those who take freshman composition will have had little experience with researching particular information. In that course, most of the researched work involves finding general information on an issue, not finding factual information about people, places, and things.

Students anticipate what their classmates might need with varying levels of success. In fact, in class, students who work hard often put less-diligent students to task, asking questions those students ought to have anticipated. Annotation reports provide page number, line of the term, a lemma, and the
Certainly, the activity of researching and writing annotations is the same whether students are majors or non-majors in upper- or lower-division courses. The difference comes in the kinds of texts that students annotate and the level of detail they find necessary to explain their items for their readers. For example, lower-division students tend to annotate with the (unstated) goal of understanding the text itself; in upper-level courses, students annotate texts that are typically inaccessible to them otherwise, like satires or occasional verse. For example, with a poem like Byron's satiric *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*, annotation lets students discover the people behind all the "names" in the poem, and they are able for themselves to discover Byron's "jokes." This works amazingly well.

Another difference between upper- and lower-division courses is that in the upper-division—since students are majors and minors—the class discussion theorizes their experience a little more. To do so, I introduce Peter Shillingsburg's four editorial "orientations" from *Scholarly Editing in a Computer Age*:

- historical orientation: places authority in the text itself and the various forms of that text, such as manuscripts, proofs, first editions, etc.;
- aesthetic orientation: places authority in "artistic forms—either the author’s, the editor’s, or those fashionable at some time;"
  (22)
- authorial orientation: places authority in those texts the author was most likely to value: manuscripts, corrected proofs, statements where an author says, "I approve this" rather than "that;"
- sociological orientation: places authority in the relationships between authors and their editors, publishers, in what has been called the "social-construction" of the text;¹

In class we adapt Shillingsburg's orientations to readers in order to help students consider what kinds of annotations different kinds of readers might want (or need). We call these "reader orientations":

- historical orientation: provides information about historical figures, events, places mentioned in the text; defines words that

might be unfamiliar or that have changed their meanings;
• aesthetic orientation: provides information about "artistic forms," how contemporary readers defined a particular genre or idea (like "the beautiful"), where the author uses (or adapts) those expectations, etc.;
• authorial orientation: provides information about when, where, why, how the author created the text; this can include biographical information;
• sociological/cultural orientation: provides information about the cultural context of the text, its readers, its publication, its allusions, etc.

Having to include information that makes their "edition" useful to a variety of readers helps students think about the considerations that "real" editors have to take into account. As a result, they become better equipped to understand what their other teachers say when they ask students to use "authoritative" texts.

Collating Variants

Though it is likely that all my students will do an activity with paired textual states, as I describe specifically with the Wyatt poem, students in upper-level classes also complete collation projects. With my guidance, students choose a text from an author in the period we are examining, and they investigate the stability of that text over ten published versions. This assignment originated in my nineteenth-century literature survey where our textbook—an anthology from a reputable publisher—provided no copyright or source information for its contents.

When the class gets to a student's poem, the student reports on the status of the text, where the major/minor variants appear, and where he or she thinks the version in our textbook came from. We examine a variety of scholarly editions, their notes on the text, and their lists of variants. Students provide written reports that follow these models: using the textbook copy as their copy-text, they assign names to their source-texts, and use those abbreviations when indicating variants.

Though students admit that their teachers have warned them that texts can vary widely, they are still amazed to find that texts can be very different from one version to the next. Their written reports include a list of variants, using standard formats, all copies of the text (with variants highlighted) and cover memo, reflecting on their work as editors.
Understanding Textual History

Robert Hume in “Aims and Uses of Textual Studies” argues that every literary critic (regardless of theoretical approach) needs to know about the composition, publication, and reception of any text he or she studies.² In senior-level and graduate courses, my students write textual histories for the works they study. The students in the senior-level courses use published sources (like collected letters and journals) and fascimiles of contemporary reviews (such as those in Donald Reiman’s Romantics Reviewed series) to investigate composition, publication, and contemporary reception, whereas graduate students draw more on archival materials and trace reception from publication to the present. Introductions to scholarly editions become our models for this kind of essay: we note the kinds of sources that editors use for their evidence and the kinds of claims that editors make from that evidence; we also assess how convincing their decisions are.

These introductions also become models for how to organize and present material in a textual history.

The Benefits of Editorial Practice and Study

Graduate students in my bibliography and research methods course gain the most comprehensive experience with the skills of documentary or textual editing. In that course students transcribe primary documents (letters, journals, and manuscripts of literary texts) from our rare books collection, annotate those documents, then create a small electronic edition of these documents coded in TEI.

In each instance—and at all levels—learning the skills of documentary or textual editing allows students to engage questions that are essential to their studies. Students examine theoretical questions about the nature of texts, authors, readers, and editors; they also learn to think of themselves as intermediaries in that process, considering what kinds of decisions they would need to make in order for readers to understand the texts they edit.

They learn how to discover information, using library resources, that will illuminate those texts for readers—and that training in research translates into better work for all their other courses.

I have seen over and over clear evidence that my students gain immeasurably from the experience of treating texts as editors would, gaining simultaneously both practical skills and theoretical understanding.
