PEDAGOGY & PROFESSION

NEW CHAUCER STUDIES

Volume 06 | Issue 02 Winter 2025

Developing a Teaching Collection of Manuscript Fragments at a Regional Comprehensive Institution

Kathryn Vulić

Western Washington University, U.S.

Vulić. 2025. Developing a Teaching Collection of Manuscript Fragments at a Regional Comprehensive Instituiuon. *New Chaucer Studies: Pedagogy and Profession* 6.2: 18–25.
https://escholarship.org/uc/ncs_pedagogyandprofession/| ISSN: 2766-1768.

Developing a Teaching Collection of Manuscript Fragments at a Regional Comprehensive Institution

Kathryn Vulić
Western Washington University, U.S.

Abstract

This essay shares the author's experiences of developing a teaching collection of medieval manuscript materials at a state school whose Special Collections library is relatively small, recently established, and modestly funded. Focusing on specific tips and strategies for collection development and for using these materials in the classroom, this essay offers practical advice for instructors wishing to provide students with a basic understanding of medieval textuality, and to add a meaningful experiential component to classes in medieval literature.

I have been working on developing a teaching collection of medieval manuscript materials since I was hired for my current job in 2004. I teach at a public, regional comprehensive, Masters-granting institution that started its life as a Normal School before it became Western Washington State College in 1961, and eventually Western Washington University in 1977. The school's legacy as a teacher's college is most apparent in the library, where a collection of children's literature is still on prominent display. In this essay I share my perspective and experience at a state school whose Special Collections library is relatively small, very recently established, and known for its collection of elementary school primers more than anything else. When I refer to a "teaching collection" of medieval manuscript materials, I mean a collection of fragments and facsimiles that offers students a basic understanding of medieval textuality, and that adds a meaningful experiential component to my classes in medieval literature. This goal may sound ordinary to faculty at research-oriented institutions who may take access to Special Collections or museum collections for granted. Such a goal was, however, far from ordinary to the campus decision-makers at my institution, who needed to be persuaded that this goal would be worth their money. More often than not, money was not forthcoming. With the support of my Special Collections librarian colleagues, I have, however, managed to accumulate a solid, if modest, collection of materials over the past several years, often with low or no cost; I have also gathered a set of takeaways from these experiences that might help others in similar circumstances.

One of the important goals in my classes is that students start to think critically about where their books come from, whether they are encountering them as readers of historic texts or as consumers of modern media. I began articulating these values and incorporating firsthand encounters with medieval manuscripts into my classes in graduate school, after taking a graduate seminar on manuscript studies and textual editing. There, I was confronted for the first time with the startling reality of just how mediated my textbooks and class editions had always been; this mediation was, before then, invisible to me. Someone had to transcribe each manuscript page; then someone had to edit the transcription to add punctuation, lineation, and capitalization; then, in some cases, someone had to translate the work. While there are best practices for each of these steps, I was surprised by the wide room for judgment and interpretation, particularly in the latter steps. In addition, for a text like *The Canterbury Tales* that survives in multiple manuscripts, a critical edition may represent the editor's best reconstruction of an authorial original (if it exists), but it likely does not match any surviving manuscript version that people actually read. After completing the manuscript studies class, I started taking each of my undergraduate classes to our large Special Collections library at least once a semester to pull back the curtain and demonstrate how scholars create class editions and translations for student use.

When I was offered the job at Western, my new institution owned only three

facsimiles of medieval manuscripts and no original materials in the collection dating earlier than 1700 that we knew about. Two of the facsimiles were of books of hours, and happily the third was the 1995 full color facsimile of the Ellesmere Chaucer, all of which the library purchased thanks to my predecessor Rick Emmerson while he was English department chair. The library purchased a fourth high-quality facsimile with one-time funds that were built into my hiring package specifically for a Special Collections acquisition. These resources let me approximate the lessons I'd taught at my previous institution. For example, to understand the rarity of book ownership, we examined the facsimiles, noting the substantial labor required to create each codex. Students would come to see how cost would play a significant role in limiting book access to the privileged. Or for another example, I asked students to try a simple paleography alphabet-page exercise, a first step in familiarizing oneself with a new handwriting by studying a manuscript page to find and copy all the forms of each letter that appears there. This assignment works especially well with the facsimile of the *Canterbury Tales* because students come to find that they can, after all, read the manuscript page once they allow their eyes to acclimate to the differences in graphemes. And one final example — I enjoyed teaching ways that reading a modern edited page can be a substantially different experience than reading the same text in its manuscript context: the tail-rhyme formatting of "The Tale of Sir Thopas" in the *Canterbury Tales* manuscript facsimile can be compared with most modern editions.

But this work with facsimiles alone skewed students' understandings of manuscript culture because all of the facsimiles reproduced deluxe manuscripts. I missed having a variety of less beautiful resources — binding fragments, dirty or worn items, incomplete pages — to show a broader range of surviving materials. Around that time, I heard Scott Gwara, Professor of English at the University of South Carolina, give a presentation at the International Congress on Medieval Studies at Kalamazoo, MI on archival research opportunities for undergraduates, including how to find and use manuscript fragments. Inspired by Scott and by the spirit of the 'material turn' and its attention to how objects such as manuscripts communicate differently from edited pages, I became increasingly interested in giving students firsthand experiences of working with manuscript materials. Scott had described specific paleography and codicology lessons that could give undergraduates some ability to study individual manuscript fragments — especially those with shaky metadata, the information that makes items searchable — and help improve their library records. He also shared his experience of calling up institutions in his region (colleges, universities, foundations, museums, public and private libraries, and the like), offering to inventory the local resources and assess their availability for cataloging, student viewing, or digitization. I loved these ideas and wanted to experiment with them myself.

I started investigating the scope and location of the manuscript collections

located within Washington State. My hope was to locate a collection that I could visit with my students, if any could be found within driving distance. Thankfully I had the help of *The Directory of Collections in the United States and Canada with Pre-1600 Manuscript Holdings* (Conway and Davis 2015). I was surprised/not surprised that the entire state of Washington seems to house less original medieval material than the single Special Collections library at Berkeley, where I earned my Ph.D. Unfortunately for me, the closest holdings were in Seattle, a good 90 miles from Western, and thus field trips were impractical. Our first successful, though temporary, collaboration came from my making a cold call to the Special Collections librarian at Washington State University, who was generous with the manuscript materials in his charge. He authorized the loan of twenty-five medieval manuscript fragments of uncertain provenance, as well as three incunables. While this collection is extremely modest by the standards of many research libraries, this was at the time one of the biggest known collections in the state of Washington. These materials remained on loan for the better part of an academic year. Before making this arrangement, I had not known that this sort of loan between libraries was possible.

This loan was a huge boon for my teaching, and I was able to incorporate the materials into each of my classes that year. I launched a new graduate class, "Reading Medieval Manuscripts," in which I devoted a portion of the class to helping students develop paleographical and codicological skills using the loaned manuscript fragments. The class met in Special Collections every day, and students developed a love of the rituals for those class meetings (finishing food and drink beforehand; washing hands immediately upon arrival; tucking pens safely away). In addition to teaching many of the same lessons I describe above, I could now add several more advanced lessons that had real stakes for the students. Many of the manuscript fragments had relatively cursory metadata, and so I challenged them: imagine you have just found one of these manuscript fragments out of place in the library, with no information to guide you. How can you identify when and where it was written and what it says, to help the librarians put it back where it belongs? To answer these questions, students start by constructing a formal transcription of a medieval manuscript page (which was, more often than not, in Latin). Next, they learn how to recognize and expand Latin abbreviation symbols; how to look up a specific hand and sometimes a specific page layout to narrow down the provenance to a time and place; and finally, because most of the fragments came from common devotional books, how to identify and translate the text using some of the online resources for early Christian liturgy. After a period of bewilderment, students inevitably had breakthrough moments (announced by gasps and exclamations that bring the other students running) when they identified a Bible passage or verse from a book of hours that helped them make a firm identification. Once one student experiences such a breakthrough moment, other students seem to realize

that the lesson goals are actually attainable, and they are even more motivated. Any discoveries the students made could be added to the library's metadata for those items, and so there is a meaningful payoff for their work. To date, this remains one of my favorite classroom exercises with graduate students, and for the students, they discover whether they have the inclination for archival work. For some students who want to go farther, I offer lessons on textual collation and edition: if two manuscripts contain mostly the same text with occasional variants, how might you decide what an authoritative, publishable single version might look like? I quickly adapted some elements of the transcription assignment for undergraduate medieval literature surveys or special topics courses, to guide them in close analysis of manuscript pages.

This temporary loan of manuscript materials and the new class it yielded helped me secure a more permanent collection. When Western's newly hired Dean of Libraries became aware of the loan from Washington State University, he became motivated to explore a possible long-term loan of medieval manuscript fragments from a rare book dealer in his professional network. I made a wish list of the kinds of fragments that would be of most use, and after several months, most of which were spent determining how the fragments would be insured while at Western, the rare book dealer loaned us 35 manuscript fragments and later added 35 incunable fragments. These loaned materials include a somewhat random assortment of antiphonal leaves, calendar pages, and Bible pages, as well as lots of leaves from psalters, breviaries, and books of hours. While none of them is especially valuable from a collector's point of view, collectively they make a huge difference in my students' experiences. These fragments were originally on loan until a few years ago, when the loan became a permanent gift upon the original owner's retirement. These materials have been digitized and are available for view on our university library's website (Western Washington University, 2025).

I derive great personal satisfaction from giving my students these opportunities to catch glimpses of archives and archival practices and also to imagine the way a medieval reader's experience of the text might have compared with modern ones. I also started noticing students coming to my classes specifically to gain rudimentary archival experience and to work with manuscript materials, whether because of the novelty or because, in some cases, students were considering literary or Library and Information Sciences graduate work. My course evaluations reflect students' hunger for unique college experiences such as this one, in which students can, in effect, go behind the scenes in the museum. My students also do become more thoughtful consumers of media — they know why it matters how a translation was made, or whether an edition renders a poem as prose or verse. I also personally benefit from these Special Collections lessons because this regular exposure to manuscript materials helps me keep my own paleographical and codicological skills sharp.

Recently, my librarian colleagues and I have started trying to leverage the existing fragment collection into something larger; we have been turning toward the community and our alumni in the hopes that interest and eventually donations will come forward. I have started offering pop-up courses on manuscript studies to a number of local groups, including community college students for whom the pop-up course is a recruitment tool, retirees who settle in our area and are eager for enrichment opportunities, and alumni who visit for reunion weekends. A few of the retirees and alumni have revealed manuscript materials that they own and are hoping to understand better. One woman shared a blurry photocopy of what appeared to be a sixteenth-century contract for the purchase of land, which, according to family lore, had been the home of her ancestors before one of them later came to America (I have not yet seen the original, but I hope to soon). An alumni couple attended a pop-up course towing a bag full of folded parchment indentures, seals largely intact. They told me that on a recent trip to England they had found these documents offered for sale, a pound apiece, heaped in a basket in front of a small village business. This couple appeared to despair that their kids would ever be interested in these materials, and so we are at the very early stages of discussing a possible donation to the library. All of which is to say, our existing small collection has been enough to attract some initial community and alumni interest, sometimes in exchange for translation and/or preservation advice.

Most of these acquisitions have come at little or no cost (aside from the insurance costs to protect any private property). I am forever grateful to my Special Collections colleagues, who have consistently been my biggest allies and partners in developing the teaching collection at my institution. This relationship is reciprocal, in that they help me with resource development, and I help them when they need testimonials from faculty or evidence of their impact on undergraduate education. Today my institution has a solid, if somewhat minimal, inventory of manuscript teaching materials. I find this personally satisfying both as a medievalist for whom an interest in material culture very much informs my teaching, and as an instructor who uses these facsimiles and fragments to help students think in historical terms not just about the content of medieval literature, but also about how medieval books were made, read, and preserved in the first place.

I end with a series of takeaways for collections development based on the experiences I have described above. To scholars facing similar resource challenges, I hope these strategies help you fill some of your resource gaps:

1. Use the resources available to you to cultivate a collection. If you have a discretionary budget, spend money; otherwise, invest your time.
2. Encourage your search committees to offer library acquisition resources as a standard part of your hiring packages. While research institutions regularly include library acquisitions or materials budgets in their hiring packages, the

practice is more uneven elsewhere.

3. Take field trips to libraries or other local institutions with manuscript collections. Librarians are often happy to share their materials with visitors.
4. Ask to borrow materials from other nearby institutions. They might not all agree, but you will not know until you ask.
5. Explore your professional networks—colleagues, librarians, administrators, and their friends and acquaintances—who might know of repositories not searchable through other means.
6. Ask administrators (chairs, deans) for financial investments in your pedagogy. New administrators in particular are often eager to make their mark and establish goodwill.
7. Consult with your alumni and members of your community, who may well own resources that they are willing to loan or even donate.

Works Cited

Conway, Melissa, and Lisa Fagin Davis. 2015. *Directory of Institutions in the United States and Canada with Pre-1600 Manuscripts*. https://bibsite.org/Detail/objects/22.

Western Washington University. 2025. "Medieval Manuscript Leaves, 1200–1500." https://mabel.wwu.edu/medieval-manuscript-leaves-1200-1500.