

BookLab: Approaches to the Material Text

I am happy to share two syllabi prepared for the graduate level “BookLab” course I teach at the University of Maryland. BookLab itself is dedicated book arts studio and press, co-founded by my colleague Kari Kraus and myself, in a converted seminar room on the same floor that houses the English department. It affords access to four tabletop presses, a collection of metal and wood type, materials for bookbinding and papermaking, a 3D printer, and more, as well as a working collection of several hundred scholarly books about books, experimental artist’s books, chapbooks, and other printed matter.

In what I imagine as its normative iteration, the class is taught physically in BookLab itself. The Spring 2020 syllabus blends key readings in the history of the book, media studies, and bibliography and textual studies with a series of hands-on activities that walk students through papermaking, letterpress, bookbinding, 3D printing, and smart materials; all of this is punctuated by visiting speakers like Amos Paul Kennedy, Jr. and field trips to points of interest like Pyramid Atlantic Art Studio, just down the street from campus in Hyattsville. The course deliverable is a book (or book-like object) of the student’s own imagining and making. Campus closed for the Covid-19 pandemic the week following Amos Kennedy’s visit, and the final projects were completed in exodus, with no physical access to any of the resources so painstakingly assembled in BookLab. (You can also see two examples of student work and their reflections in this issue of *In the Classroom*: [Pamela’s Letterbox](#) by Dylan Lewis and [Pandemic Transmission](#) by Daniel Pereira.)

When it became clear that in the following year, Spring 2021, the BookLab course would again be taught remotely, I decided to rethink its objectives. This is the second syllabus you see here. I had two primary goals. The first was to socialize students in the professional apparatus of textual studies and the history of the book. Thus the “fieldwork” requirement, which asked them to take advantage of the myriad online offerings available during the pandemic, as well as the extended prose introductions I crafted to orient them to each week’s readings. The second goal was to use a portion of the class as a writing practicum with the goal of a finished paper suitable for presentation at a professional conference. To that end, I allocated the final third of the semester to drafting and workshopping. Then, with the students’ consent, I organized a public early career researchers’ seminar at which they presented their work in public. For two hours we had, as I said at the time, the “best Zoom room in book history” as dozens of colleagues and peers generously gave of themselves to attend. Dr. Lisa Maruca (who was the students’ choice) served as a supportive and incisive respondent. Each student, I believe, came away from the event with additional confidence in their work.

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The syllabuses can be viewed below or downloaded here ([Spring 2020](#) and [Spring 2021](#)).

[Kirschenbaum_ENGL-759C-S20-BookLab-Syllabus](#)

[Kirschenbaum_Syllabus-ENGL-759C-Approaches-to-the-Material-Text-Spring-2021](#)

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