

“It’s Like Holding History in Your Hands”: Using Inquiry-Based Learning in an Interdisciplinary Special Collections Instruction Session

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Abstract

As undergraduate curricula move toward an active, interdisciplinary model, librarians and archivists are able to implement new, more inquiry-based activities into library instruction sessions. This opportunity allows students to develop their information literacy skills in an engaging and personal learning laboratory environment while benefiting from a rich classroom experience. This article discusses a collaboration between the library and an emerging academic program at a small professional liberal arts school that paired special collections and primary sources with an inquiry-based activity to maximize student learning, demystify special collections, and promote critical thinking.

Keywords: library instruction, special collections and archives, active learning, inquiry-based learning, primary source research, interdisciplinary instruction.

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Introduction

Undergraduate curricula are changing to embrace interdisciplinarity, global thinking, and lifelong learning. Meanwhile, students are looking for degrees and educational programs that will help them develop skills for a demanding and competitive job market. Innovative methods of teaching have long involved a decentralized classroom, collaboration among students, and the expression of understanding and learning over rote memorization. “Tell me, and I’ll forget; show me, and I may remember; involve me, and I’ll understand”; this proverb eloquently summarizes and explains inquiry-based learning (Carothers, 2011, p. 75). Inquiry-based learning relies on learning how to learn, or learning through asking questions, rather than through the absorption of knowledge from an assumed authority (Rockenbach, 2011). This pedagogical theory has been practiced for decades and has been gaining traction in higher education within the last 20 years. An important part of inquiry-based learning pedagogy is allowing students to take on the role of researchers and authorities during the inquiry process, instilling a sense of responsibility for work that is their own. This student-centered learning empowers students toward real critical

thinking and decision-making. Research-based learning is not limited to the completion of specific projects, however; it can take place whenever faculty and students share the act of discovery.

With this pedagogical practice in mind, librarians at the Mary Kintz Bevevino Library sought to design an instruction session for an interdisciplinary course in the medical and health humanities at Misericordia University using the Center for Nursing History of Northeastern Pennsylvania's special collection materials. By combining practices used in material culture as well as information literacy, librarians aimed to provide students with the opportunity to think critically and engage in historical inquiry by using primary sources as an effective means of incorporating inquiry-based learning into the classroom. Using an inquiry-based approach to material objects, students in an interdisciplinary class can explore how a historian, who "relates to the objects of study as survivals of the past," seeks to use historical inquiry to "[reconstruct], [impose] order, and [re-assemble] the past, by use of the present surviving artifacts" (Vannatta, 2014, p. 57-58).

Misericordia's Healthcare Legacy

Misericordia University, located in Dallas, Pennsylvania, is a Catholic university with strong programs in the health sciences and a total enrollment of 2,879 students (Misericordia University, n.d.). It was founded in 1924 (then College Misericordia) to provide educational opportunities for the daughters of the region's coal miners. The Scranton/Wilkes-Barre area is an historic coal mining region that helped fuel the country's industrialization in the 19th and 20th centuries. The Mary Kintz Bevevino Library at Misericordia University uses a librarian liaison model to offer specialized information literacy instruction to individual academic departments and programs.

Housed in the Sister Mary Carmel McGarigle University Archives at the Mary Kintz Bevevino Library, the Center for Nursing History (CNH) of Northeastern Pennsylvania was founded in 2005 with funding from the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission. As nursing schools and hospitals in the region merged and closed over the course of the 20th century, interested faculty and alumni took it upon themselves to save photographs and materials documenting school activities and student experiences. The Center was founded to address the need to preserve this rich—and quickly disappearing—local history. Since the first nursing school opened at the Wilkes-Barre City Hospital in 1887, thousands of nurses have been educated and trained in the Wyoming Valley. The mission of the Center for Nursing History stems from a strong desire to

preserve and share the stories of local nurses by giving these (mostly) women—lay and religious alike—a voice in a largely marginalized area in the history of medicine. The materials in the collection are acquired largely through donations of nurses, former nurses, and their families. Centralizing the collection at Misericordia University draws on the institution's core values of mercy, hospitality, service, and justice, and its role as a steward of place in the community as the first higher education institution in Luzerne County—that was also a women's Catholic college. Nursing and nursing education have long been staples of the curriculum at Misericordia University: Bachelors of Science degrees with a specialization in nursing education were conferred in 1943, and the first four-year Bachelors of Science in Nursing (BSN) degrees were conferred in 1965. Its nursing program remains one of the institution's most successful and popular among all the healthcare programs offered.

The Center for Nursing History collection comprises approximately 50 linear feet of correspondence, diaries, photographs, memorabilia, textiles, books, ephemera, medical instruments and equipment, oral histories, audio/visual material, and printed matter, dating approximately between 1897 and the mid-2000s. A portion of the Center's photographs is digitized and available on JSTOR Forum (formerly Shared Shelf Commons), an open access library of images, audio, and film. The analog collection is minimally processed and storage is divided between the Library and an adjacent facility.

The medical and health humanities represent a growing field of “interdisciplinary and interprofessional collaboration that focuses on the human mind and body, the human experience, and human dignity as related to medicine and healthcare” (Misericordia University, n.d.). The Medical and Health Humanities Program at Misericordia University, launched in 2016, seeks to offer a “broad educational experience that challenges students to view healthcare through the lens of cultural, familial, philosophical, spiritual, mental, and social conditions.” The program's goals include: “Understand[ing] how cultural perspectives impact the concept of wellness”; and “Develop[ing] strong writing skills across multiple disciplines and addressed to varied audiences.” The introductory course to the major, MHH 201: Introduction to Medical and Health Humanities, was taught for the first time during the spring 2017 semester and continues to be offered once per academic year. The class “introduces students to primary concepts and issues” within the field by examining health and illness through the “lens of humanistic study including history, philosophy, religion, art, music, and literature” (Misericordia University n.d.).

Literature Review

As academic libraries focus on information literacy instruction, special collections librarians and archivists will likely spend more time in the classroom. Despite this shift, as Krause (2010) has noted, archivists have generally received little-to-no formal training in instruction and thus can find it challenging to communicate their contributions in the classroom to administrators and other stakeholders. Higher education has also begun to adopt active learning principles within the curriculum. Inquiry-focused learning embodies this dynamic learning approach and engages students to actively discover and pursue information while incorporating information literacy skills to problem solve (Coffman, 2017). Hess (2015) explored the importance that motivation plays in learning and instruction and argues that using self-directed research impacts a student's motivation to "learn and connect the skills they possess for personal research to their academic search process" (p. 52). Hess (2015) also noted that students should have time in the classroom to practice the skills and concepts they are actively learning in class, either independently or in small groups (p. 52).

Archivists and special collections librarians, instruction librarians, and teaching faculty stand to gain much from collaboration. Hensley, Murphy, and Swain (2014) studied the impact of a collaboration between archivists and instruction librarians on learning outcomes in an introductory rhetoric course. Through the use of online surveys and post-instruction interviews, they found that six themes emerged around the idea of archival intelligence: confusion between archives and the library; analyzing argument/perspective of documents; availability of digital primary sources; understanding of archival use policies; transferable skills; and genuine interest in history. They argued that these themes can form the basis for collaboration between instruction librarians and archivists in order to implement learning outcomes and assessment practices for archival instruction sessions (Hensley, Murphy, and Swain, 2014, p. 105-09). Similarly, Mazella and Grob (2011) found that collaboration between a special collections librarian and teaching faculty developed students' advanced information literacy skills that model the process scholars employ. Through the development of a Guided Resource Inquiry tool to promote the integration of online primary source material into course assignments, Jarosz and Kutay (2017) observed that students who "used the tool also showed improvement in understanding the research process" (p. 216).

Students benefit holistically by interacting with primary source and archival materials. By using inquiry-based learning to investigate

objects, Silver (2014) has argued that students can become more proficient observers and that “critically examining everyday items can lead to discoveries about [...] what cultures care about, what they take for granted, or how they communicate status or identity” (p. 21). Through her pilot-assessment project, Horowitz (2016) found that when students noticed and commented on the physical nature of different types of materials, they began to consider the value of non-textual evidence in their research (p. 225). Students in her study also scored higher on communicating, organizing, and synthesizing information after working with primary sources (Horowitz, 2016).

Professional organizations and librarians alike have identified the importance of primary source literacy and the benefits students gain from interacting with archival materials in the classroom. The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) and the Society of American Archivists (SAA) have developed the Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy (approved March 2018). Prior to the adoption of these guidelines, librarians and archivists created their own standards and frameworks to better understand the impact of primary source instruction on student learning (Carini, 2016).

MHH 201: Introduction to Medical and Health Humanities

As part of regular academic outreach during the spring 2017 semester, the special collections librarian emailed the professor teaching MHH 201 to offer both her services and the CNH collection as a valuable teaching tool. Having used the collection in a previous course, the professor was interested in adapting and refining an assignment to better fit the outcomes for the MHH 201 course while also benefiting from the special collections librarian’s material culture knowledge. By partnering with the instruction librarian, the special collections librarian was able to use an instructional design process to formalize outcomes and assess student learning during the session.

Before the start of the spring 2017 semester, the special collections librarian, instruction librarian, and professor met to discuss the types of collection materials suitable for the level of the assignment and timeframe given for research. The professor wanted to give students a general introduction to the CNH collection as well as time to interact with the items about which they would write their essays. At this stage of planning, the special collections librarian adapted an in-class activity that incorporated material culture approaches to support the assignment (Appendix A). The librarians next selected material for students to research and interact with during the in-person session, identifying ten items from

the CNH collection that would best suit the parameters of the assignment and in-class activity (Appendix B). During this process, they utilized existing description from the collection, including identification of objects and their provenance, such as previous owner(s) and name of nursing school or hospital from which the object came and/or was used.

The final assignment asked students to create a three-page “biography” of their object (using three questions: what is it?; who used the object and how?; and what does the object tell us about healthcare at the time of its use?). The assignment addressed two of the course’s disciplinary objectives: evaluate concepts of health and illness from an interdisciplinary perspective; and analyze cultural ideas of health and illness. Anticipating that students would struggle with the more conceptual form of research needed for this assignment, librarians created a course guide using LibGuides and placed relevant book titles (mostly covering nursing history) on reserve for student use.

Both librarians cite active learning as an essential part of their teaching philosophies and thus made a conscious effort to include this principle into the instructional design of the 75-minute session. The session was structured to: (1) introduce students to special collections; (2) model historical inquiry as a process; (3) use an in-class group activity to allow students to practice historical inquiry; and (4) allow students to choose and interact with the item they would study for their assignment. The session took place in a multi-purpose room of the library, with different stations for items from the CNH collection. Each station provided handling instructions for the different types of materials (photographs,



Figure 1: MHH 201 students interact with items from the CNH collection. Image courtesy of Misericordia University.

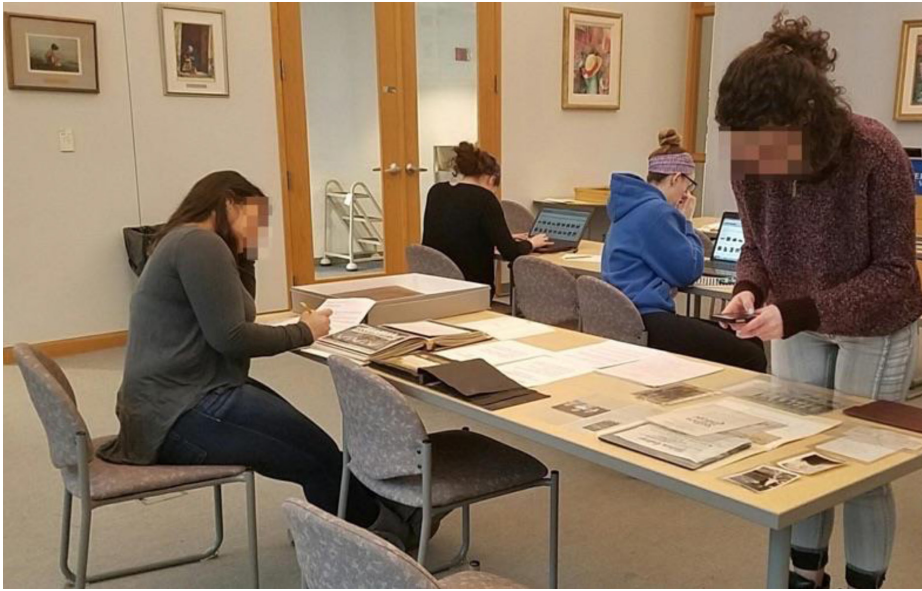


Figure 2: Students in the foreground interact with items while students in the background use research stations. Image courtesy of Misericordia University.

textiles, bound volumes, documents, etc.) as well as information about the nursing schools from which these items originated. The instruction librarian also set up a research station with three laptops and a selection of the reserve books so students might take advantage of immediate research assistance in order to begin identifying secondary and contextual sources.

The librarians employed a flipped classroom model in which students watched two instructional videos that introduced special collections and material culture, reviewed a handling procedures handout, and read a short chapter on nursing history in order to orient them to some of the social, cultural, and economic aspects of nursing as a profession prior to the in-person session. Informal assessment techniques (e.g., questioning and observation) at the outset of the in-person session measured student comprehension of these concepts. Before students interacted with the materials on their own for the in-class activity, the librarians modeled the historical inquiry in which students would engage by demonstrating a sample approach to the assignment and activity. Highlighting their own lack of medical expertise, the librarians interrogated an object they had learned was an atomizer by using the activity handout and searched library resources and digital repositories to identify sample secondary sources. The modeling showed students different approaches that, based on individual interests and curiosity, could result in very different projects.

After this demonstration, students broke into groups to complete the in-class activity. Each group had an item from the CNH collection and worked together in order to complete the worksheet. Once students

began interacting with objects, librarians and the professor circulated throughout the room. When groups posed questions, the librarians tried to coach them on how to identify resources that could help them answer these questions themselves, or countered with probing questions meant to help students reframe their initial inquiry. At the end of the in-class activity, librarians led students through a class discussion so everyone could see the lines of inquiry each group applied to their object. Before the final portion of the class, students completed a minute-paper which the instruction librarian subsequently reviewed. The final 30 minutes of the session were reserved for students to interact with the objects available for their assignment. In order to facilitate and allow for an iterative research process, librarians held an hour-long open lab two weeks after the classroom session for students to interact with their objects a second time and seek librarian assistance in their secondary research. The librarians encouraged students to begin their secondary research early in order to best take advantage of the open lab session, should they need to interact with the object again.

Discussion

Through their partnership, the special collections librarian and instruction librarian were able to create a formal instruction plan that included student learning outcomes and an assessment plan. One benefit of this partnership was the ability to measure and report on the student learning taking place in the classroom. Not only does assessing student learning articulate the library's ability to demonstrate value and contributions to the classroom, but it also helps solidify partnerships between the library and academic departments. In order to effectively measure and assess student learning, librarians used ACRL's Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education (2016), ACRL and SAA's Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy (2018), and a set of standards Dartmouth College Archivist Peter Carini (2016) created to write learning outcomes for their session.

Librarians identified two of the six frames in the Framework for Information Literacy (2016) relevant to the session's content: research as inquiry, which articulates how the "spectrum of inquiry ranges from asking simple questions [...] to increasingly sophisticated abilities [that] [...] explore more diverse disciplinary perspectives" (p. 7); and searching as strategic exploration, which illustrates that "experts select from various search strategies, depending on the sources, scope, and context of the information need" (p. 9). Three of the five learning objectives from the Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy (2018) were incorporated into writing outcomes: interpret, analyze, and evaluate, which asks students to "situate a primary source in context by applying knowledge about the time

and culture in which it was created” and “factor physical and material elements into the interpretation of primary sources including the relationship between container [...] and informational content” (p. 5-6); read, understand, and summarize, which expects students to “identify and communicate information found in primary sources, including summarizing the content of the sources and identifying and reporting key components such as how it was created, by whom, when, and what it is” (p. 5); and conceptualize, in which students “distinguish primary from secondary sources” and “draw on primary sources to generate and refine research questions” (p. 4). Additionally, three of Carini’s (2016) standards were considered: know, which introduces students to primary sources and how to distinguish them from secondary sources (p. 198); interpret, which stresses the importance of using “observation as a tool to understanding and analyzing documents” (p. 198); and use, which details the proper method of handling primary source materials (p. 199). Because the initial iteration of the MHH collaboration took place in the spring 2017 semester, the Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy had yet to be formally adopted, hence the use of Carini’s standards in addition to the ACRL/SAA guidelines.

The instruction session had three learning outcomes tied to it:

1. students will be able to interrogate primary source objects in order to discover how objects are imbued with cultural significance;
2. students will be able to formulate research questions about their object in order to find secondary sources that fill in information gaps;
3. students will be able to determine relevant disciplines that produce secondary sources in order to measure the cultural or historical significance of their object.

Additionally, the two instructional videos each had one learning outcome tied to it:

1. students will be able to recognize objects as primary sources in order to understand that objects have informational value (*What kinds of information can we get from everyday objects?*);
2. students will be able to appreciate special collections and archival repositories in order to respect the informational, intrinsic, and monetary value of items in their care (*What can I do in a special collections or archives?*).

While not identified implicitly in the learning outcomes, thing theory featured prominently in the structure and planning of the assignment and activity. Before the in-class group activity began, the special collections librarian stressed the

importance of thing theory in separating an object from its explicit use or purpose and to instead consider the economic, social, cultural, and religious context of these items. Because the assignment asked students to first interact with an historical artifact and then use secondary research in order to compose an essay that explored that artifact's role in healthcare, librarians sought to provide students with an example of how to interrogate an object's "thingness." The librarians wanted to convey thing theory as described by Bill Brown (2001):

We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us [...] The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relationship to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation. (p. 4)

Applying a constructivist theory of learning to their instructional design, the librarians believed that the in-class group activity would allow students to work cooperatively to test how thing theory can create knowledge and engage information in a new way. Because the Medical and Health Humanities Program is interdisciplinary, the library session also included a few nursing students who may have been familiar with some of the objects. Recognizing that each student would bring their own experience and understanding to the project, the group activity allowed students to test this new approach to interacting with objects with viewpoints different from their own, taking advantage of the class's range of expertise. In order to provide a mental model for this approach, however, the librarians thought it beneficial to model their own sensemaking process. By modeling the behavior of historical inquiry, librarians hoped to simultaneously demystify special collections materials as well as introduce a material culture approach to items and provide students with an explicit example that highlighted the questions, setbacks, and successes that two librarians (i.e., research "experts") experienced. They demonstrated how they: documented their observations of the physical object, posed a variety of questions they wanted to answer about the object, and sought primary and secondary sources to help answer these questions. The librarians' different avenues of research allowed them to present students with an amalgam of resources and strategies that let their curiosity lead them through the history of the equipment, its role in caregiving, its inventor, and the company that produced the item.

Multiple measures were utilized to assess how these learning outcomes were being achieved. Given the variety of topics covered in the instruction session, both formal and informal as well as summative and formative assessment strategies were utilized. The assessment plan was informed by

numerous considerations. Not many instructors at Misericordia have used primary source objects in their classrooms, and the MHH collaboration presented the special collections librarian the opportunity to show the added value that these kinds of instruction sessions can have for students across disciplines. Still in its infancy, the MHH program also benefited from being able to succinctly report the impact of pedagogical strategies like the inquiry-based session in the MHH 201 course. Similarly, the library was able to demonstrate how its collections and librarians were teaching new kinds of literacies to the student body. The core curriculum at Misericordia University includes an information literacy requirement, and sessions like MHH 201 showcase the measurable benefit that library instruction has on student learning.

A formative assessment took place at the beginning of the in-person session via informal questions during a class discussion. This questioning allowed librarians to gauge student comprehension of handling procedures and the video learning outcomes. Two formal assessment measures were planned. After the in-class group activity, students completed a minute-paper that asked: (1) do you feel comfortable working with primary source objects? if not, why?; (2) what are you confused about? After finishing the minute-paper, students moved on to choosing the object for their assignment, during which the instruction librarian reviewed responses while the special collections librarian facilitated student interactions with collection items. As a formative classroom assessment technique, the minute-paper allowed librarians to address student confusion immediately during the session. It also served as a reflective practice for students to consider the concepts introduced during the demonstration and group activity. A survey released through the course's learning management system after the assignment was submitted served as a summative assessment measure (Appendix C). The results of this survey directly informed future iterations of this activity. Librarians also assessed student use of resources. While views of the course guide were high (particularly the week prior to the assignment's due date), use of book reserves was low, leading librarians to discontinue placing materials on reserve. As the collaboration has matured, the MHH 201 professor has commented on the improved quality of object biographies.

Future Plans

As the collaboration between the library and the Medical and Health Humanities Program enters its third year, the inquiry-based primary source object session was included as part of the 2018 National Endowment for the Humanities grant awarded to the program to revise

its curriculum (Misericordia University, 2018). The special collections librarian will continue to work with the director of the program to implement the session in the MHH 201 course.

Conclusion

Archives or special collections can be considered a learning laboratory that encourages curiosity and allows students to practice information literacy skills. Students can learn the power archives hold for shaping public memory and the role that archival professionals have in collecting, maintaining, interpreting, and providing access to the materials in their care. Archival materials allow students to test hypotheses and ideas touted in secondary sources, and to understand through a variety of types of materials, that no single story tells the full story. An inquiry-based user education session with special collections like the one used in MHH 201 allows librarians to interact with students and introduce them to an area of the library with which they may be entirely unacquainted (Cech and Margalotti, 2013). These sessions provide exposure to special collections material, allow students to interact with information sources in ways they previously have not, and promote an interdisciplinary learning environment that encourages students to relate in a personal way to materials from the past.

The collaboration that took place between the medical and health humanities class, itself an interdisciplinary field, and librarians, allowed this instruction session to focus on multiple contexts and provided students with an opportunity to explore how a single item, divorced from its practical purpose, holds tremendous social and cultural significance. This session also let librarians offer access to a collection that is still only semi-processed. Current archival practice does not always prohibit access to and use of semi- or minimally-processed collections; the CNH collection is a valuable and worthwhile endeavor that has many multi- and interdisciplinary applications. If the library had waited until the CNH collection was fully processed, given staffing and resource limitations, it would take far too long for such a rich collaboration to occur.

Students in the session experienced the thrill of discovery through a small, curated set of items that allowed them to engage with and develop their information literacy skills in a learning laboratory. This inquiry-based activity gives students the responsibility for assigning meaning to an item without a perceived authority impressing significance onto that item. Instead, they actively join the scholarly conversation as they develop their sense of authority and define their voices as budding scholars, as they, as one student observed, held history in their hands.

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Appendix A

In-Class Activity

MHH 201: Introduction to Medical and Health Humanities Material Culture Object Activity

Objects are imbued with cultural significance. Thinking about an object's creation and use(s) gives you an insight into the time and place in which it was made and potentially used. But remember cultural norms, language, and social conventions change over time. Think about the way(s) in which the object fits into other social conventions of the time. Asking questions of an object allows you to evaluate it for audience, bias, context and historicity—very similar to how you analyze a piece of writing to figure out its argument and rhetorical devices used to make that argument. You ask question of an object as to its purpose(s), past and present. You can use your senses as a way to ascertain information from the object.

Answer the following 4 questions below. Included are some ideas of questions to help you think about your item as an object and then consider its wider context(s).

» What do you observe?

What is it? Why was it created? Whom was it created for? By whom? What is its size? What is it made out of? Did that make it easy or difficult to have on one's person? Does it come in a package? When was it made? Is it still made? Is it a unique item?

» What do you think you know?

Based on your observations of the object's thingness, what conclusions do you draw about it? Was it meant to be carried around? Why would that be useful/meaningful? Do the materials it's made of mean it was expensive or not very? What are the social, historical, economic, medical, etc. aspects of having made/used such an item? In what context might such an item be used? Was it meant to be thrown away? Is this comparable to anything you've encountered before? What kinds of emotions does this item evoke and how do you come to that conclusion?

- » What do you want to find out?

Does the item suggest anything to you that you're curious about? Does it create more questions than answers? Through what lens or lenses can you then interpret your object?

- » What do you need to be able to find out more information?

What kinds of resources would you need to find out more about the item?

Appendix B

Items Included in In-Class Session from the CNH

- » [Nurse 1] US Army Cadet Nurse Corps uniform and accessories group (multiple items available)
- » [Nurse 2] US Army Cadet Nurse Corps photographs, clippings and other documents group (multiple items available)
- » Medical equipment
 - » Medicine warming spoon with burner (Nanticoke State Hospital School of Nursing)
 - » Bausch and Lomb otoscope (Nanticoke State Hospital School of Nursing)
 - » Baumanometer sphygmomanometer (unidentified school/hospital)
 - » Porcelain Lenox bedpan & cloth (Pittston State Hospital School of Nursing)
 - » Plasma Lyte & IV tubing (Pittson State Hospital School of Nursing)
- » Other items
- » Priest's last rites kit

Appendix C

Survey

1. Did you feel adequately prepared to interact with items from the Center for Nursing History?
2. Upon completion of the library session, did you feel prepared to locate secondary sources about your item?
3. Did you use the Course Guide or course reserves to complete your assignment?
4. What is one thing you wish you would have known before the library session?
5. What were you most surprised about when working with primary sources and special collections objects?