

# Introduction to *AHR* Forum: 'True, Impossible Teaching Archive', Part One

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**I**NSPIRED BY IDEAS ORGANISING RACHEL SAGNER BUURMA AND LAURA HEFFERNAN'S *THE Teaching Archive: A New History for Literary Study* (University of Chicago Press, 2021), this AHR forum also takes its title from one of the book's introductory passages:

The true history of English literary study resides in classrooms... most of the study of literature that has happened in the university has happened in classrooms. Counted not just in hours and weeks, but in numbers of people, stacks of paper, and intensity of attention, the teaching of English literature has occupied a grand scale. More poems have been close-read in classrooms than in published articles, more literary texts have been cited on syllabuses than in scholarship, more scholarship has been read in preparation for teaching than in drafting monographs. Within institutions of secondary education large and small, numberless teachers and students have gathered to read both an astonishing number and an astonishing range of texts together. If it were possible to assemble the true, impossible teaching archive—all the syllabuses, handouts, reading lists, lecture notes, student papers, and exams ever made—it would constitute a much larger and more

interesting record than the famous monographs and seminal articles that usually represent the history of literary study. (2)

With their gesturing to a ‘true, impossible’ collection, Buurma and Heffernan make thinkable an immense and elusive archive. The significance of this speculative gathering of teaching and learning records is brought to life through their book’s focus on a selection of curricula and other teaching-related documents that reveal the rich and varied practices of the literary studies classroom. Exploring the archives of both famous and not-so-famous teachers (Caroline Spurgeon, T. S. Eliot, I. A. Richards, Edith Rickert, J. Saunders Redding, Cleanth Brooks, Edmund Wilson, Josephine Miles and Simon J. Ortiz), the book attends to evidence of both methodological and content-based experiments in the classroom. In so doing, it illuminates the diversity of approaches, texts and topics comprising twentieth-century curricula, which, encompassing literary educations in community colleges and extension-education organisations, have both extended beyond and fed back into the methods and content of university-based courses.

The Teaching Archive thus elucidates classroom environments and methods that have not simply received ideas about canon formation but also played an active role in shaping and expanding broader literary knowledge. These range from Caroline Spurgeon’s meticulously ordered teaching notes that reveal how her early-twentieth-century classes cultivated indexing and proto-computational methods to the importance of Simon J. Ortiz’s 1980s courses on Native American literature to his scholarship. The book thus provides a counter-history contesting long-established views about the dominance of the canon in pre-1968 literary studies. While Gerald Graff has emphasised the role of ‘theory’ in destabilising literary studies after that moment, John Guillory has focused on the importance of the culture wars in the context of the expansion of liberal pluralism.

Nevertheless, Guillory’s argument about pluralism and the academy has helped to articulate the ways in which late-capitalism has impacted both research and teaching, with the upscaling of managerialism and intensification of neoliberal policies gathering pace as the twenty-first century proceeds. The ongoing diminution of university budgets and resources for literary studies and other core-humanities areas means that it will not be long before these disciplines will be taught in a handful of elite universities only. Following economic fallout accompanying COVID-19, retrenchment of staff and casualisation of academic labour are also threatening the very survival of literary studies in many universities, where the tying of promotion to research funding means further undervaluing of teaching and where economic value has come to trump all else.

Part One of this ‘True, Impossible Teaching Archive’ forum addresses these and other issues, with nine contributions from authors who are also teachers,

researchers, students, critical- or creative writers and/or a combinations of all of these roles. The forum includes Kate Fagan's 'Poetry Workshops as "True, Impossible Archives" (or, Teaching as Collaborative Research,' Sumana Roy's, 'Writing Water: The Curious Behaviour of W,' Kevin Pask's 'Resistance to Teaching,' Meg Brayshaw's 'Some Thoughts on the (Im)Possibilities of Teaching Australian Literature,' Sean Pryor's 'Experiences Differ: A Reflection on Teaching Literary Studies,' Simon During's 'Exciting Discipline,' Ronan McDonald's 'Vincent Buckley's Teaching Archive,' Keyvan Allahyari, 'Punishment and Pedagogy: The Casual Future of Teaching Literary Studies' and Monique Rooney's 'Trigger Archive: What is a True, Impossible Teaching Archive?'

Part Two of 'True, Impossible Teaching Archive' will be published in *AHR* in November 2021.