Teaching the History of the Book

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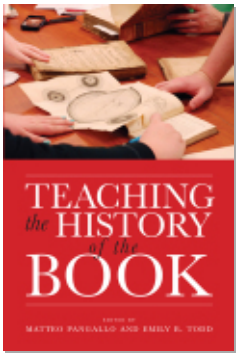

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CHAPTER 4.2

Meet the (Book) Beetle

TEACHING WITH A TABLETOP LETTERPRESS

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The BookBeetle is a tabletop screw press modeled on a Gutenberg or common press. It is designed and sold by Josef Beery of Free Union, Virginia.[1] By turning a handle attached to a 1⅛-inch steel screw, the operator can lower a Baltic Birch plywood platen with sufficient force for printing from metal or wood type, wood or linoleum blocks, or photopolymer plates. The Beetle ships with a 7 × 10-inch wood chase, a starter set of furniture (including traditional wedge-shaped quoins), and boards and sheets for fashioning tympans and friskets. It does not ship with type, a composing stick, ink, or certain other necessary supplies.[2] Nonetheless, the relatively complete nature of the Beetle package, together with its availability (alleviating the need for chasing items on the secondhand market), makes it an attractive choice for a start-up letterpress space, particularly one oriented towards instructional purposes (Figure 4). The press is lightweight, lending itself to moving around a room or transportation on a cart. The chase is sufficient for a small folio or even a tiny quarto, and is perfect for postcards, bookmarks, and the like. We have even found that it can be operated from a seated position, which aids accessibility. Finally, it is as safe a press as one could hope to find in an instructional setting: it would take an almost inconceivably deliberate act for a hand to stray beneath the platen (and to stay there while the screw was being gradually tightened).

We have been working with a BookBeetle at BookLab in the University of Maryland's English Department since 2018, and though

FIGURE 4. Students in the University of Maryland's BookLab working with the BookBeetle Press. Courtesy of the authors.

we have added other presses to our inventory it remains our go-to for introducing students to the practice of setting and printing movable type.[3] This chapter, which is addressed to an instructor contemplating creating a letterpress space for teaching the history of the book, details some lessons we have learned. We work with all types of classes, from undergraduate and graduate courses that spend the entire semester in our space to one-off visits where students are introduced to the basics of letterpress. Like any tool, the Beetle also has its limits, and we will discuss some of those, too.

Because it is modeled on the Gutenberg press, the Beetle looks like the presses students see in woodcuts and engravings of early print shops. Indeed, we start by handing out copies of those images and asking students to match what they see to what is on the table in front of them. They can identify screw and platen, tympan and frisket, pins for registration, and ink daubers, as well as accessories like type cases. They can also observe the individuals doing the different jobs in the shop, making it easy to discuss the distribution of labor and

roles in relation to the press itself. And because the screw press has been put to so many diverse uses across different parts of the globe, many students recognize that the same mechanism has been used to press linens, strike coins, crush grapes, secure books for binding, and flatten paper, to name just a few of its myriad applications.

Above all, the Beetle presents itself as accessible and inviting. Even a small Kelsey-style clamshell press can appear inscrutable and intimidating with its springs and levers, screws and clamps, rollers and ink disk. By contrast, students can look at the Beetle and intuit how it works based on elementary physics (or what cognitive psychologist Don Norman calls "discoverability"): turn the screw, lower the platen, and press the tympan and paper sheet against the relief surface of the inked type.[4] Not everything is intuitive of course: when pulling impressions for the first time, some students are tentative about sliding the chase beneath the platen, and they frequently express uncertainty over how much force to exert with the screw. Indeed, the Beetle can produce a very strong bite—not so good for type, which can eventually wear down under pressure. We also know of at least one instance in which the press's bolts were sheared by turning the screw with too much gusto.

But the most important lesson the Beetle has to offer may not lie in its mechanics or its historical antecedents. The operator quickly learns that nearly every material feature of the process is a variable in the outcome of the final product. Teaching someone the basics of how to set and print type can be done in an afternoon, but achieving quality and consistency can take many trials. The force with which the screw is tightened, the amount of ink on the type, the weight and grain of the paper—all of these play a part in how the impression will turn out, just as printers have always understood. For some, the difficulty of achieving consistent results may be seen as a drawback. However, it is key to understanding the historical "nature of the book," in Adrian Johns's phrase.[5] And it is especially revelatory to students accustomed to digital content, where pushbutton perfection is the order of the day. As Beery often suggests in conversation, it is best to regard the press as an active collaborator in the creative process, leaving its mark as surely as the compositor and puller.

Beyond these physical variables, engaging in the repetitive, historical, physical *process* of letterpress printing can realize in students a variety of other embodied insights. Theories of critical making argue that in an age that prizes often uncritical "disruption" and "innovation," engaging students in acts of hands-on making through and with a theoretical framework can help them contribute more conscientiously to society and think critically about the innovations and disruptions in which they regularly partake. Theories of experiential and active learning also show that students tend to understand concepts more fully and retain more information when more of their senses are engaged. Our own experiences in BookLab suggest that engaging in the physical, whole-body process of printing can spark viscerally felt revelations about history, process, materiality, and labor.

The discipline of English has long sought to impart an appreciation for the processual nature of writing, but the implication tends to be that it is a largely cognitive process, one that occurs *in* the brain and *on* the page as students write and revise. Printing *with* (rather than on) the Beetle, students experience just how much physical work goes into producing even a single sheet of printed text. That in turn can open conversations about other physical (and digital) processes of making, crafting, and working. In this way, hand-printing can put one in contact with the larger present by inviting students to consider the processes and labor required to bring everything into being that surrounds them—the things they make contact with every day. Letterpress printing is a visceral *and* intellectual way in to understand how these varied forms of making have shaped political, social, and economic practices, both then and now.

These are all salutary lessons. But it is also true that at times the Beetle may sometimes frustrate. Printing is less consistent in the corners of the chase than in the center we have found, making it less reliable to set up a larger or more involved forme. To some extent this can be compensated for with packing, but this is not a professional production press or a press for exceptionally fine printing. Absent heroic measures, the Beetle also does not lend itself to printing at scale (job printing). Five or ten impressions from a single puller in a single session is reasonable; fifty or a hundred is not. Our next press

after the Beetle was a nineteenth-century platen press so students could understand the advantages of self-inking rollers. (Of course, such presses are more involved to operate and maintain.)

Other challenges also manifest when the Beetle is used in a classroom setting. They include the limitations of having only one chase available for student projects, as well as the constraints of a limited printing area for students who wish to produce larger broadsides and page spreads. These can be compensated for to an extent. For example, to allow more than one student to utilize the Beetle's chase at a time, an instructor might have four students lock-up type in a different corner of the chase. Lines to be printed can be shifted into the center, each in turn. This workaround ensures that all students have the opportunity to experience printing their own work, while encouraging them to consider a more ambitious composition for the future. Likewise, ordering extra chases (and additional furniture) is well worth the investment; since the chase can double as a galley tray, students can also then leave larger projects set up.

We have found that two additional changes to the printing process can assist in improving the classroom experience: altering the structure of the tympan and frisket, as well as simplifying the method used to proof and register type. Traditionally, printers would proof their type by first ensuring correct placement of the paper in the tympan and frisket for proper registration. Using a knife to cut the appropriate printing area, the printer would create a window within the frisket to protect the non-printed area of the sheet. Once the sheet to be printed was aligned with the proper margins, printers would pull an impression on a spare sheet. This "proof" would then be reviewed and edited to ensure that all letters, spacing, and punctuation were accurate before the edition was continued.

The Beetle can accommodate a different approach. Rather than adhering the frisket to the tympan, as would be traditional, alternatives involve taping up the two long sides of the tympan, sliding packing materials (including copy paper, newsprint, or Bristol board) between the tympan boards, and then taping the short end closed. To account for the missing frisket, adhere a piece of Mylar to the face of the tympan which will come into contact with the printing

area. Proofing and registration can now occur without the use of the frisket and pins: instead, students can print directly onto the Mylar for proofing and editing and apply masking tape or photo corners for proper registration of their prints. These actions reduce the multiple sheets of paper typically required for registration and proofing, and also eliminate the printer's need to cut a new frisket for each job. The Mylar itself can be wiped with mineral spirits and reused. Sometimes registration can be even less fussy: if precision is not the object, students can proceed simply by laying sheets directly atop the inked type and closing the tympan over the sheet.

Besides the classroom, these techniques have proven especially useful for a genre of events called "Community Prints." Taking a cue from Pyramid Atlantic (a nearby book arts center), we often organize these events topically around the news or campus events. The idea is to have standing type ready to go on the Beetle for whomever wishes to stop by BookLab to print an impression or two. During the Brett Kavanaugh hearings, for instance, participants could print the messages "Believe Women" and "Believe Survivors," and on the two hundredth anniversary of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, anyone interested could print a bookmark with a quotation from the novel. Community Prints can support political activism and social interaction while at the same time introducing the curious to the pleasures of printing. Because the Beetle is so easily transportable, this activity can be set up almost anywhere.

At BookLab, letterpress—and from the outset, the BookBeetle—has become the centerpiece of a space that differs in some not-so-subtle respects from the traditional English Department classroom. BookLab is filled with strange objects, sounds, and even smells. But it has also become an important space for community and conviviality in trying times, whether as measured by the state of the world or the state of our discipline. We have heard that BookLab has the reputation of being a "happy place" on campus, one where students feel free to slow down, experiment, explore, and create. That is why activities like the Community Prints are so important. In the end, our presses and type are finally just material manifestations of less tangible sets of values, or (better) these tools are our active collaborators.

Notes

1. See the Beetle's website for up-to-date pricing and ordering information: http://www.bookbeetlepress.com/. See also Beery's chapter in this volume.
2. Cait Coker's blog post is an excellent guide to outfitting a new campus letterpress space: Cait Coker, "Setting Up a Print Shop" *Women in Book History Bibliography* (blog), July 1, 2018, http://www.womensbookhistory.org/sammelband/2018/7/1/gvsfa1sn00js8550d00ra5fdskdyv9.
3. BookLab is the Maryland English department's makerspace and printing studio. We work with students from across the university to explore, imagine, and make books. Information is available here: Department of English, University of Maryland, "BookLab," ccessed October 16, 2022, https://english.umd.edu/research-innovation/booklab.
4. Don Norman, *The Design of Everyday Things: Revised and Expanded Edition* (New York: Basic Books, 2013), 3, 10, and *passim*.
5. Adrian Johns, *The Nature of the Book: Print and Knowledge in the Making* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).