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Students and Digital Projects at WMU: Working and Learning Together

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Students & Digital Projects @ WMU

Working and Learning Together

Marianne Swierenga, Cataloging and Metadata Librarian
Western Michigan University Libraries



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But first, I'd like to introduce you to a young German man named Paul. Paul's most likely about 18 or 19 years old when he first writes home from the military training grounds in Darmstadt. The postcard, dated November 10, 1916, is filled in with thick pencil, addressed to the Family of Gustov Pommer in Frankfurt. He writes about getting fitted for his first uniform. A few days later he writes home again, this time he's found enough paper scraps to write a few pages. You can see the script changes as he needs to find new writing surfaces throughout his busy day. He uses a large space on the first page to write, Dearest Mother! He tells her about his daily life, the swearing-in ceremony, rat infestations, the cold. His one request to her: please send a towel.

Now known or unknown to Paul, also in early November 1916, on the Western Front near the Somme River, the French and British were ending the long offensive against the entrenched Imperial German Army. As Paul was just beginning his training as soldier, the Battle of Somme came to its muddy, bloody, and inconclusive end. German losses were estimated at about 450,000 killed and wounded. In about a year and a half, Paul would be sent to join the Spring Offensive on the Western Front, and be wounded. But don't worry, he lives. This is his picture in a field hospital in Brussels in 1918. He lives and creates a scrapbook of his time as a soldier during the first World War.



And a year or two ago, this item made it's way to Kalamazoo, Michigan and into our Special Collections. We had some description from the dealer, and Paul, in very German fashion, had expertly laid out the scrapbook by important time periods of his military career and each section had one envelope for all the correspondence sent to him and another for all the items written by him. Already, this is way better than the majority of scrapbooks we've seen, right? And yet, here I am, looking at WWI-era German script (which I don't read btw) written on hundreds of tiny pieces of paper in pencil and wondering how I'm going to approach the description of this item.

Local Digital Collections @ WMU Libraries

- Cataloging and Metadata
 - Services
 - Metadata design and creation
 - Cataloging of archival collections
 - Digital finding aids
- Research Services
 - Collections
 - WMU Archives & Regional History Collections
 - Special Collections
 - Government Documents
 - Services
 - Digitization Services
 - Mapping and GIS
 - Institutional Repository

Lucky for me then that I don't have to go it alone, and we have a team. Our Local Digital Collections team is made up of Librarians and staff from Research Services and Resource Management. My unit, Cataloging and Metadata, is part of Resource Management, and the services we provide that help in the creation of digital collections are the cataloging of archival collections, assisting with ArchivesSpace and digital finding aids, and the design and creation of metadata. Research Services, which was newly formed during our recent reorganization, contains our specialized collections: Archives and regional history, gov docs, rare books and Special Collections. And also services like digitization, mapping, and our Institutional Repository, which you could argue is both a collection and a service. Together we select, design, manage and implement digital projects.

Student Types

- Undergraduate/graduate hourly library assistants
- Graduate Assistantships (IR, Medieval Studies)
- Interdepartmental independent study students
- Library school practicum students
- Occasional volunteers

Now, we can come up with all the awesome projects we can from our endless supply of cool things in our collections, but as you know, digital projects are labor intensive. Luckily, we have had amazing students working with us over the years that have brought their time and talents to our projects. Being a research university, we're lucky to have access to a number of student types.

Student Work

- Staff the front desk at Special Collections and run the reading room
- Track instruction requests, gather materials and set-up/tear-down for class
- Process archival collections and create finding aids
- Inventory and prepare collections before digitization
- Scan and photograph materials
- Perform post-production quality control on digitized materials

Here are some of the main things our students do, with varying levels of supervision depending on their training and experience.

Student Learning

- Proper care and handling of rare materials
- Conservation and preservation skills involved in book repair
- Create exhibits throughout the library
- How to inventory and properly describe materials
- Digitization practices, software and equipment
- Best practices for file naming and file management of digitized materials

While performing their duties, here are just a few things they learn. Some of these are very basic, yet transferrable skills, and some of these I'd say are very desirable skills, especially if they intend on continuing working with digital projects in a library or museum setting. As a team, we're starting to think more intentionally about this Student Learning aspect of selecting and designing our projects. Not only how the end product can be used for research and learning, but how the process itself can be a learning experience by involving students in the creation of digital collections.

The Pommer Scrapbook Project

Problem

- 600+ unlabeled pieces
- Scrapbook + multipage pieces
- Mostly handwritten
- German scripts

Solution

- Inventory project
- Book reader digital objects
- High quality scans and color control
- German language student

And we saw a lot of potential with the Pommer Scrapbook Project to incorporate students into the process. We were thrilled about the idea of taking this complex archival object and turning it into a digital collection. And this one item really was a collection in and of itself, with over 600 individual pieces. But before we could start working on it, we really needed to figure out some high level issues and their solutions. We have over 600 unlabeled pieces attached to pages or stuffed into envelopes: We had to do an inventory project to know what we had, it's place in relation to the whole, and a numbering system to keep it in order and accounted for during the project. Another issue was that we have a multipage scrapbook filled with double-sided and multipage pieces. How do we create a digital surrogate that captures the complexity of the original object?: We decided to photograph the scrapbook as an 3D object, and also photograph each page in order to create a digital BookReader object with a flipping page feature, and also scan each part of each piece and have them displayed as BookReader objects too. And finally our last big issue: the scrapbook was completely in German, and handwritten. We could scan the letters at super high resolution, processed to bring out the script, but without a translator, I was at a loss. Luckily, we had the perfect student in mind, a German language and history student who also worked at our Archives.



The first thing we did was to photograph the scrapbook. We wanted to capture the feeling of the physical object, so we took some 3D images, then used this similar set up to get high resolution pictures of each page, which we use to create a flipping page style of book reading object in our Luna platform. We also used these images as a guide later, as we removed pieces to scan. This is our amazing student from Digitization, who also happens to be a photographer. We put those skills to use and he loved using our Hasselblad camera.

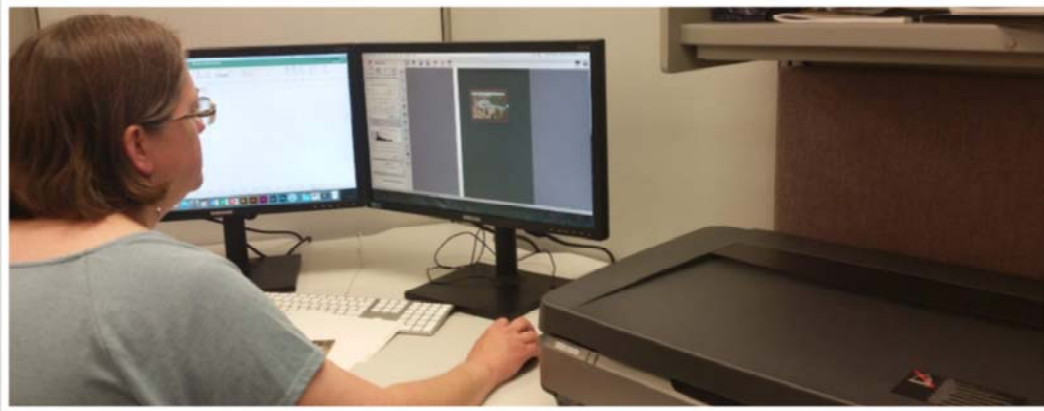


Our next step was to have a complete inventory, which required developing handling and marking rules. In order to construct unique identifiers we had to decide what was a page, a piece, and a part. Students and a former student turned part-time employee marked each piece and part. Temporary folders were created for transferring the items to Digitization as not to put too much stress on the actual scrapbook.

Item	file name	scan	qc	Process	load file	RkRdr	Total Parts	Blk Card	Photo Card	Letter	Env	Photo	Other	Notes	Rare Book Notation
Item 3: "erhalterer": small envelope; bottom of page: 6x4.5"/11x16cm															
Piece 1 = envelope; Postmark: 11.4.18; 5x3.5"/12.5x9cm															
exwsPmr4_pg18_itm3_pc01_pt1		X	X								1			"to" address, Postmark: 11.4.18	3/1/1
exwsPmr4_pg18_itm3_pc01_pt2		X	X											"from" address	
Feldpostbrief; Frankfurt; postmark: 11.4.18; 5x3.5"/12.5x9cm															
exwsPmr4_pg18_itm3_pc01_pt3		X	X											unfolded; writing (horizontal); dated 11.4.18; top of page glued to inside of envelope; 4.25x6.25"/11x15.5cm	3/1/2
exwsPmr4_pg18_itm3_pc01_pt4		X	X											pg [2] - indicated by II on page; writing (horizontal); is the inside of the envelope; 7.25x5"/18x12.5cm	
exwsPmr4_pg18_itm3_pc01_pt5		X	X											pg [3] - indicated by III on page; writing (horizontal); w/signature; bottom is attached to inside of envelope; 4.25x6.25"/11x15.5cm	
Piece 2 = envelope; Postmark: 12.4.18; 6x3.75"/15x9.5cm															
exwsPmr4_pg18_itm3_pc02_pt1		X	X								1			"to" address; postmark: 12.4.18	3/2/1
exwsPmr4_pg18_itm3_pc02_pt2		X	X											"from" address (cut partially off when letter was originally opened)	
Feldpost; Frankfurt; postmark: 12.4.18; 6x3.75"/15x9.5cm															
exwsPmr4_pg18_itm3_pc02_pt3		X	X											unfolded twice; left side: writing (horizontal); dated 11.4.18; 5.75x7.25"/14.5x18cm	3/2/2
exwsPmr4_pg18_itm3_pc02_pt4		X	X											pg [2]; unfolded twice; right side: writing (horizontal); 5.75x7.25"/14.5x18cm	
exwsPmr4_pg18_itm3_pc02_pt5		X	X											pg [3]; flipped over; left side: writing (horizontal); 5.75x7.25"/14.5x18cm	
exwsPmr4_pg18_itm3_pc02_pt6		X	X											pg [4]; flipped over; right side: writing (horizontal); 5.75x7.25"/14.5x18cm	
exwsPmr4_pg18_itm3_pc02_pt7		X	X											pg [5]; inserted sheet unfolded; "II" on top of page; writing (horizontal); 5.75x7.25"/14.5x18cm	3/2/3
exwsPmr4_pg18_itm3_pc02_pt8		X	X											pg [6]; inserted sheet unfolded; writing (horizontal); w/signature; 5.75x7.25"/14.5x18cm	

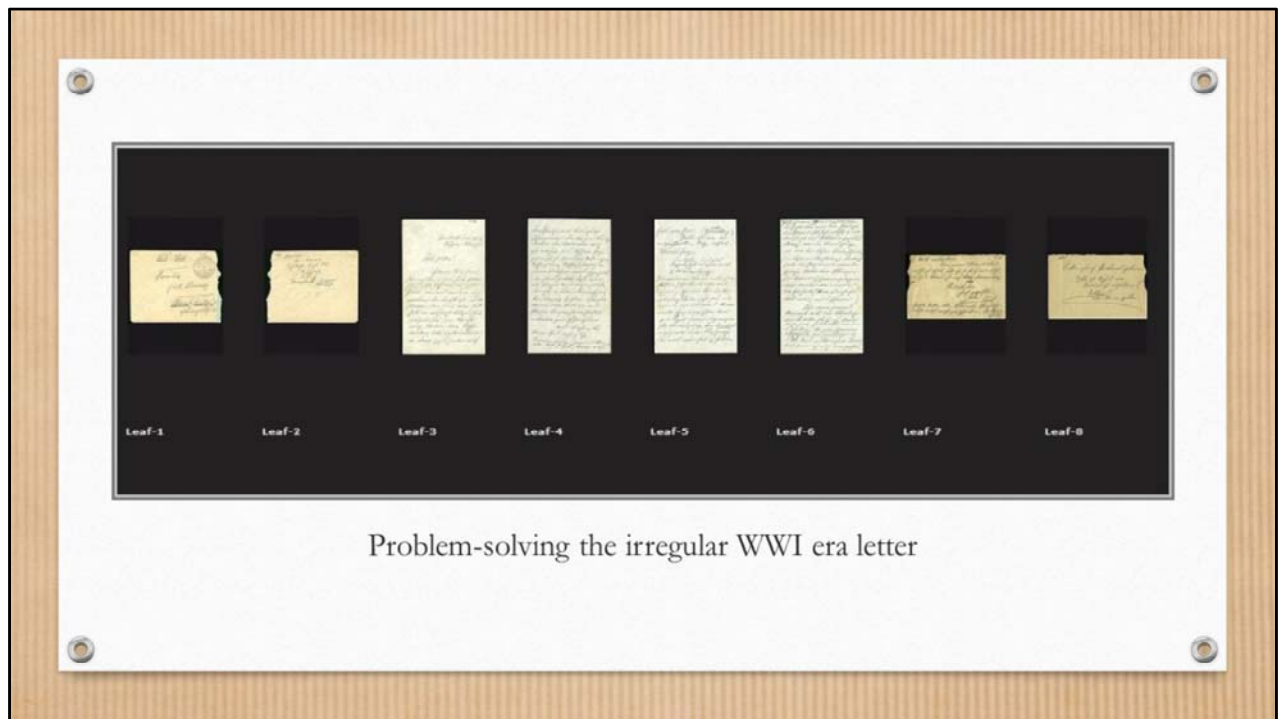
Rechecked That Color: R6B. 3-23-18
 ✓ = spreadsheet up-to-date as of 5-15-18

Working alongside the Digitization Projects Coordinator, our student created this inventory spreadsheet which numbered, labeled, and gave physical description of each piece. It was used to track the items as they went through scanning and processing.

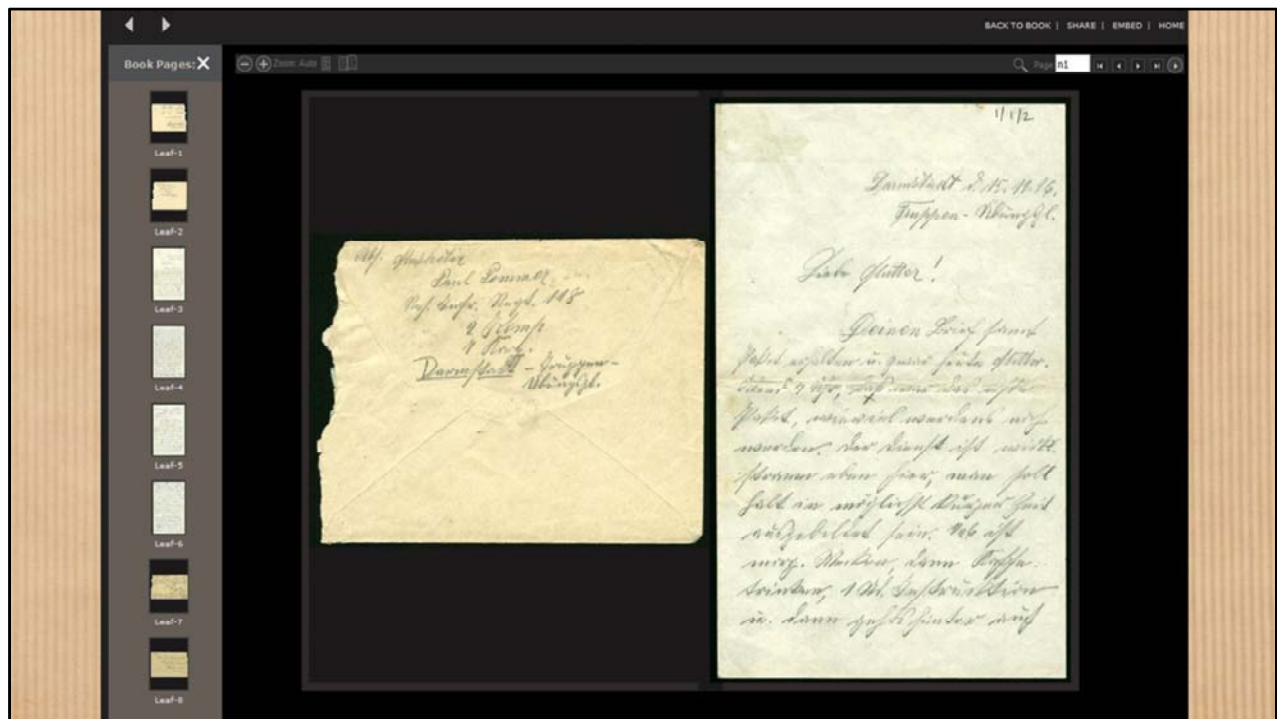


Student worker digitizing postcards

This is our student Melissa from Digitization, who helped create that fabulous spreadsheet. She's scanning a postcard at her workstation.

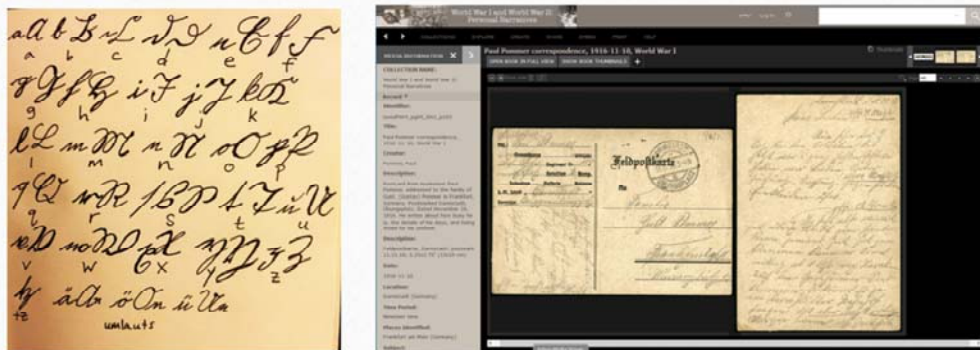


And this is an example of some of the irregular materials our students scanned and had to configure into what we call BookReader objects. For the flipping page feature to work best, each canvas has to be the same size, so the envelopes and scrap papers needed to have dark background.



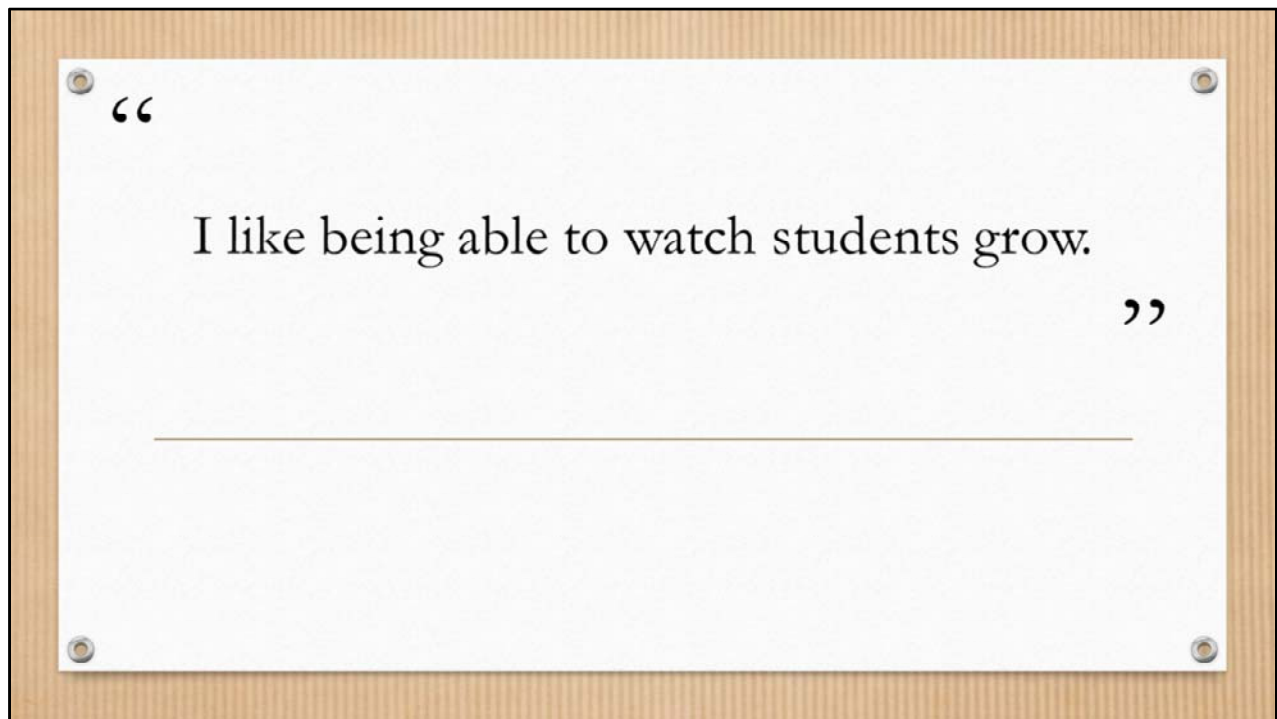
The final product looks great, gives the feeling of the original object, and only requires one metadata record. But creating the BookReader object does require extra set-up and file management. And each object needs to be loaded into our Luna platform individually and linked to the record by hand.

Translation and Description

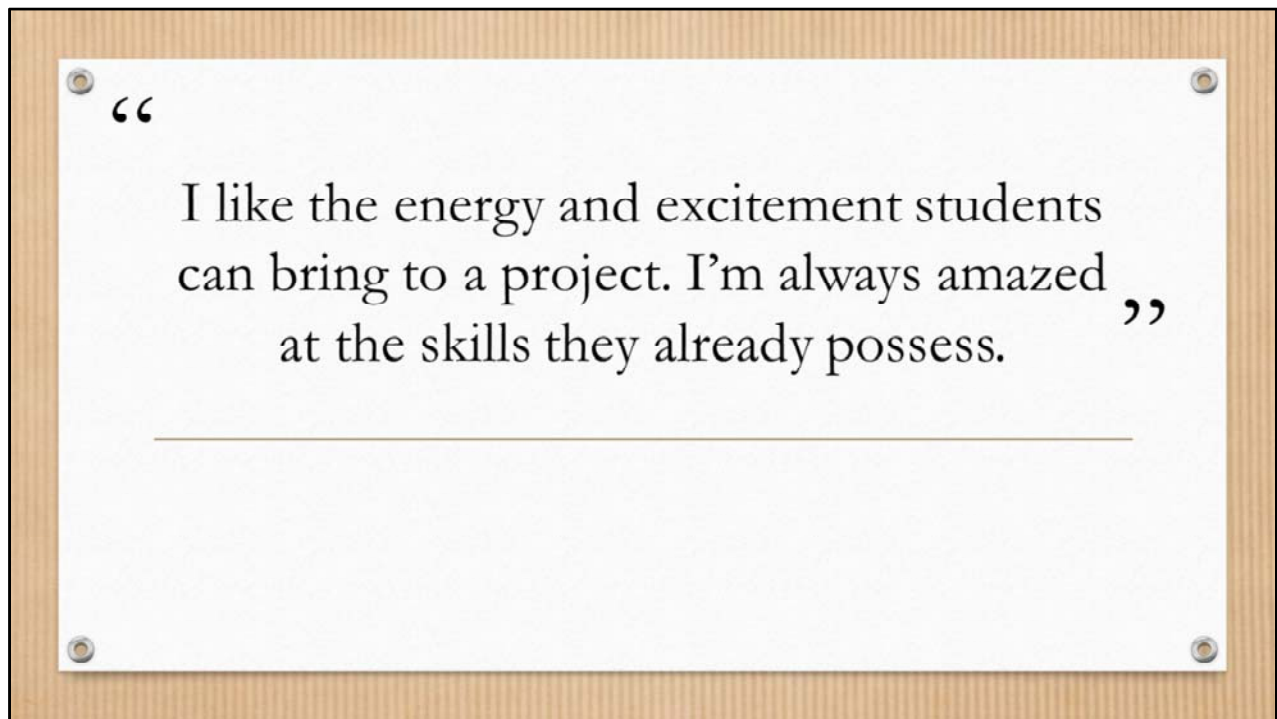


The hardest part of this project was being able to properly describe the content of correspondence handwritten in German. The student I mentioned before was able to arrange a semester long independent study for German credits. I could tell he was concerned at the speed it was taking him to work; there was definitely a learning curve in deciphering the handwriting. But one day I come in and he's all excited, having researched old German scripts and found a timeline for when they were used and examples. And with this key, he was able to begin translating the content. He got quite good, and completed summaries for about 40 pieces of correspondence over the semester. I was then able to take his summaries and format them to meet our metadata profile. He also completed transcription on two pieces that he then used as primary source material in a research paper about food shortages during the war.

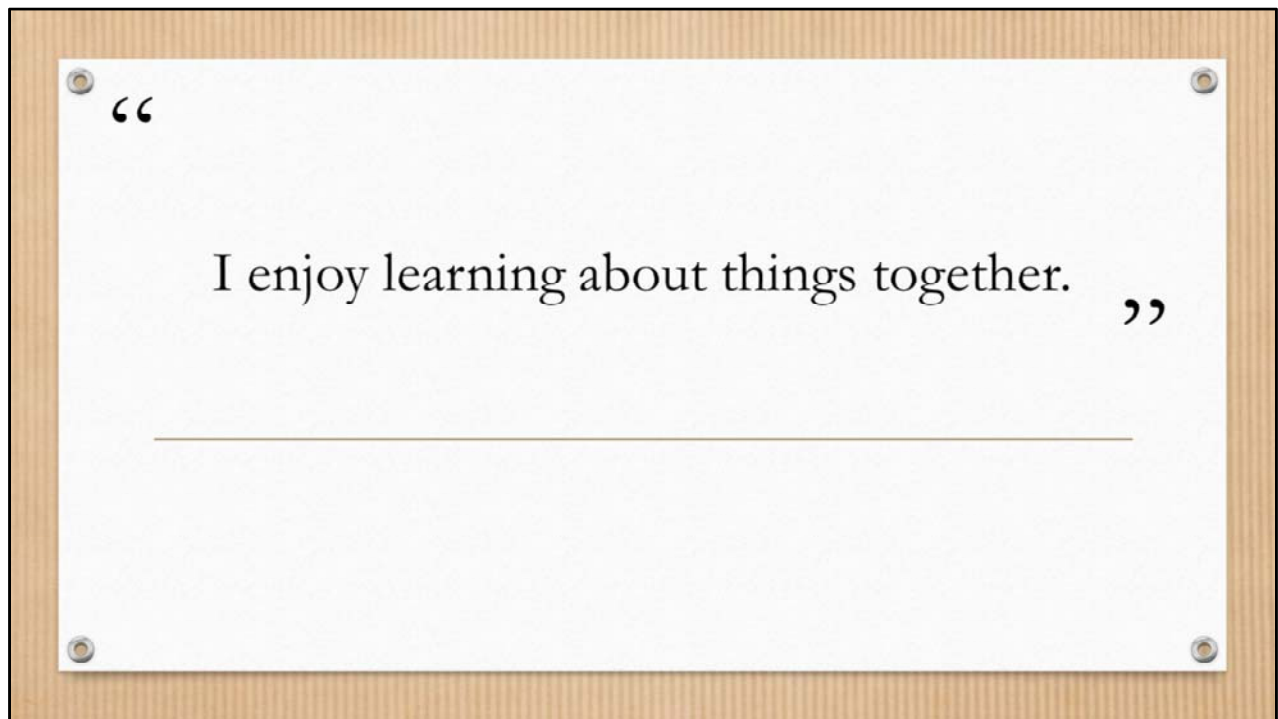
[Image: Deutsche Kurrentschrift]



Our student's journey during his independent study was one of exploration and growth. And I loved seeing it happen in the library. When asked about their work with students on digital projects, the other staff and faculty were very positive. A coordinator in our Special Collections said, "I like being able to watch students grow."



Another quote, “I like the energy and excitement students can bring to a project. I’m always amazed at the skills they already possess.” And we’re incredibly lucky with the variety of skills our students bring with them: photography, graphic design, languages, specialized subject areas.



And this quote is my own. What I find most exciting about working together with students is that we're able to discover and learn about things together. When Jacob translated Paul Pommer's first full letter home, we sat and talked excitedly about how such a small thing as a young man asking his mother for a towel made Paul real in our minds. This is the power of primary sources. And why having students work with them directly can make such an educational impact.



Please visit the collection as we add more letters this summer. Our goal for the overall collection is to continue adding materials from different soldiers, both World Wars. I know we have great material in our regional collections that I'd like to include and my hope is that we'll begin to see overlap in locations and themes.

Thank You

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Cataloging and Metadata Librarian

Western Michigan University Libraries