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A Model for Creating and Publishing a Collaborative Critical Edition in the Classroom

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Introduction

This essay describes a collaborative editing project undertaken by an upper-level undergraduate English course at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln (UNL). As a class, we edited an out-of-print and out-of-copyright literary text, writing a critical introduction and researching and writing historical and contextual annotations, for which we received a contract with the trade imprint of an academic publisher. The book was published in the fall of 2025, with the instructor and all the students listed as coeditors. This essay, written jointly by the course’s instructor and two of the student editors who participated in the course, serves mainly as a case study of one type of editorial recovery work that is possible in a university classroom. It is also as an opportunity to reflect on the generative intersections of textual recovery and pedagogy from the perspective of both the instructor and the students. We first present the instructor’s overview of the project before concluding with student and instructor reflections on the project’s outcomes, lessons, and challenges, with the goal of providing enough detail about the project’s conception and structure so that it can be recreated, at least in some version, in other classrooms. In an era of increasing commodification of higher education, in which all disciplines—and the humanities in particular—are being asked to justify their “worth,” projects such as this, which incorporate experiential learning and result in tangible “products,” can serve as useful and easily communicated examples of the value of the work we do (and have always done) in the humanities.

Instructor's Overview of Project Conception, Setup, and Execution

The project was created for a course titled “Editing and the Publishing Industry,” which is an introduction to the world of editing and publishing and is mainly taken by third- and fourth-year English majors and minors. Importantly, the class does *not* focus on scholarly editing, digital archives, or editions. Many students come to the course interested in becoming book editors, agents, or publishers; still others come as creative writers, wanting to learn more about what goes on behind the scenes of a publishing house. The course features numerous guest speakers from the editing and publishing industry, as well as visits from writers talking about their experiences publishing their work. In the class's most recent iterations, students undertook two major projects while working in small teams. The first was the creation of a mini-literature anthology focused on a theme of their choice. The second was the creation of an issue of a literary journal on which they served as editors, soliciting and editing submissions. Both the mini-anthologies and single-issue journals were printed on demand and presented at an end-of-semester “launch party.”

While there were many things that I found fun, inventive, and beneficial about these projects, I had two regrets: they did not give students direct exposure to the publishing industry, and the work created during the semester likely had no life beyond the course itself. My background in digital humanities and my work creating publicly available digital archives have fostered in me a desire to do work that can have a public life, a life beyond the walls of a classroom or academia. In this, I find myself in agreement with Joel Salt, Allison Muri, and Ronald Wayne Cooley, who note in their research about creating digital editions in the classroom that “[h]umanists are fond of pedagogies that emphasize process over product, but the requirement to produce a product informs and transforms process in important ways.”¹

And as John Bryant and his coauthors note in a recent issue of this journal, discussions of the challenges and benefits of what is now termed “experiential learning” date back centuries, noting too that “editing is learning and that an engagement in the making of a ‘well-made,’ even a ‘well-filled’ edition is itself a learning experience.”² But while my first impulse was to have my students create their own individual or collective digital edition, I worried that such a project would not provide the direct exposure to the “traditional” publishing industry that many of the students were hoping to gain from the course.

With these concerns and inspired by the work of a colleague at another institution,³ I decided to have our class work together to create a critical edition of an out-of-print and out-of-copyright literary work and then pitch the project to print publishers. In addition to allowing the students to have more direct interactions with the publishing industry, the project would also be an exercise in textual recovery and a demonstration of the power of scholarly editors to re-form and expand the literary canon.

My colleague who had undertaken a similar project published his class's book with Saluki Publishing—the trade imprint of Southern Illinois University (SIU) Press—so I reached out to an acquisitions editor there to see if the press might have an interest in another student-created edition. The editor said that they had been pleased with their previous student collaboration and would be open to another project, should the title be a good fit with the press's areas of interest. Given SIU Press's specialization in Midwestern history, Midwestern literature, and theatre, I proposed an edition of Susan Glaspell's 1915 novel *Fidelity*, which had been out of print in the United States since its initial publication. Glaspell is mainly known for her work as a playwright, particularly for cofounding the

famed Provincetown Players in 1915 (the same year that *Fidelity* was published). She would go on to be awarded the 1931 Pulitzer Prize for Drama. Yet despite her success as a playwright, Glaspell arguably thought of herself first and foremost as a novelist, publishing nine novels throughout her lifetime. All her novels were out of print and at the time of the class, and three were in the public domain. Of these, *Fidelity* seemed the most promising. A formally innovative feminist text, the novel tells the story of Ruth Holland, a young Iowa woman who falls in love with a married man and elopes to Colorado. But following her father's death she is forced to return home, where she must contend with the scorn of her family and community—only to defy convention yet again in the book's powerful conclusion. SIU Press seemed intrigued by my proposal, and although I had not received a firm commitment or contract by the time the class started, I decided that there was enough interest to justify the class working on the edition. (I had, in the meantime, also reached out to a few other presses). Should the press turn us down, we would publish the text on the University of Nebraska's Digital Commons or as an online digital edition. In the meantime, the students would be able to follow along as the negotiations with the press played out in real time—a realistically useful experience in and of itself.

I will admit that I was at first annoyed—and, frankly, a bit embarrassed—that when the course started, I did not know the final form that our class project would take. I worried that this suggested poor preparation on my part and that the students would be irritated by the lack of clarity. However, I was honest with them about where things stood and explained that such unknowns—not to mention the act of constantly refreshing your inbox as you waited for word from a publisher—were themselves a good lesson in dealing with editors and the publishing industry. I also decided that not presupposing the final form of publication forced the class to think about the process and skills inherent to editorial practice writ large—that is, we spent time talking about the aspects of a critical edition that would be required regardless of the edition's form. Questions of copy-text, the proper level of critical and interpretive intervention, desired editorial apparatus, and other issues could play out at a theoretical level without the distractions that often come from worrying about looks, layout, and display. It was, in short, a great excuse to begin by focusing on the “what” and “why” before getting to the “how.”

Luckily, a month into the semester I heard back that SIU Press was on board with our class's project, offering to publish the book under their Saluki Publishing trade imprint, where it would be marketed largely toward general and classroom use. The press also agreed to list all the students as coeditors. I excitedly shared the news with the class, and it was clear that the students were invigorated by the prospect of being involved in the publication of a real live book. I shared the press's proposed terms with the class and we discussed the pros and cons, collectively deciding upon our response. We received an official contract in April, which I was able to review with the students. We also worked as a class to fill out the press's required marketing questionnaire. Our acquisitions editor with SIU Press even agreed to Zoom-call into one of our class sessions, introducing herself, thanking the students for their work, and answering some of their questions. All these activities continued to be supplemented by class visits from other practitioners in the world of editing and publishing, and as we learned about the different types and phases of the industry, students were able to see how our in-progress project fit into this larger landscape. As these visits and contract negotiations played out, we continued our editing work as a class.

I brought in a giant stack of critical editions (Norton, Bedford, and others) and we spent one class period looking through them, noting the range of features they had, the length and location of the annotations, the types of critical apparatus, and other editorial aspects. Another class was spent clicking through digital editions and noting similar things. We then brainstormed as a class—making a list of editorial decisions that we needed to make

in the preparation of our edition of Glaspell's text—and prioritized the decisions, creating a ranked list. All decisions were made as a class, with final decisions determined by a full-class vote. For example, after having decided that annotations were a key and necessary feature of a critical edition and that we wanted to include at least some annotations in our edition, we brainstormed a list of what types of things we *might* annotate and then narrowed down the list to arrive at our annotation philosophy.

The students were then divided into six editorial teams of four to five people each. Having decided that we wanted to include a critical introduction, we spent one class period discussing what functions the introduction should serve and then dividing it into six sections, each to be co-written by one of the editorial teams. The sections we settled upon were:

1. A brief biography of Glaspell.
2. A brief exploration of early twentieth-century feminism and societal power structures tied to gender.
3. A brief history of the views of marriage and divorce in the time period, as well as society's views of fidelity and infidelity.
4. A summary of the contemporary reception of the book.
5. A critical history of the book.
6. A justification of the book's historical and literary significance, as well as a brief pitch for Glaspell's importance as a novelist.

Each group was asked to elect an editorial team leader, who would be responsible for keeping the group on task and communicating with the managing editor (me). (Although not their primary purpose, these instructions served as a subtle introduction to the publishing industry's [sometimes problematic] structural hierarchy.) Each editorial team was also assigned a specific section of the book (divided by chapters), with each team responsible for selecting, researching, and writing the annotations that would appear in their section. Each group first flagged potential terms or items for annotation and shared the list with me. We discussed these proposed annotations as a class and made adjustments to bring the various sections into closer alignment. Each student was then responsible for researching and drafting a certain number of the annotations in their section, which were first proofed by their own editorial team and team leader before being turned into me.

Each team then turned to their respective section of the introduction. I asked the students to find some primary and secondary resources that they thought would be useful for their research; I reviewed these and offered further suggestions. It was up to each editorial team how to divide the work for their section, but they all knew that part of the class's final assessment was an individual reflection on the project, in which I explicitly asked them to discuss whether work was fairly distributed and whether all team members made equitable contributions. Because of this—and because they were just a great group of students—I had almost no issues with students shirking work. As with the annotations, each team drafted their section and first proofed it themselves, before passing it along to me for final proofing. It was then my task, at the end of the semester, to take each team's section and make sure they worked as a cohesive whole. As one might imagine, some sections were stronger than others, with some requiring extensive editing and reworking. Yet I strove to remain as faithful to the students' original text as possible, and most of the words that appeared in the final submitted manuscript were the students' own. In the final weeks of the

class, I also had students submit potential cover designs for the book. I chose what I thought were the strongest submissions and shared them with the press. Somewhat astoundingly, the press ultimately decided to use a slightly modified design submitted by one of my students for the cover, crediting him on the copyright page. The book made its way through the editorial and production pipeline and was published in the fall of 2025, with me and all the students listed as coeditors.⁴

Outcomes, Lessons, and Challenges

Student perspective #1: Sarah Danielson

I enrolled in the course “Editing and the Publishing Industry” to find out if a career in the editing field might be a good fit for my skills and interests. I was experiencing a mini-crisis of career plans after offering editorial feedback to an indie fantasy author and wondered if editing could be a better fit than teaching. This made the course project particularly helpful for me because I not only learned *about* the various stages of editing and publishing, but I also got to *participate* in them at the same time. As a student trying to flesh out what I want to do with the rest of my life, this scholarly editing project was well-timed and illuminating.

In my time as an undergraduate English student I had many opportunities to write creatively, research independently, perform textual and literary analysis, and steep my mind in the works of diverse authors. What I did not have exposure to, however, was first-hand negotiations with a publishing house and real-world work experience in textual recovery. Our project with Susan Glaspell’s *Fidelity* provided me a chance to dip my toes into the world of scholarly editing with the unique pressure of creating something that would exist in the world outside the classroom. This style of experiential learning was incredibly rewarding for me personally, and is worth the consideration of instructors interested in connecting their classroom with the real world in a way that goes well beyond a traditional assignment.

There were two aspects of the project that I believe had room for improvement, the first being how the project is negotiated with the publisher. If this type of project were to be done regularly, it would greatly benefit from having a standing agreement between a publisher and the university. Since there are severe time constraints that come from fitting a project such as this into a single semester, minimizing back and forth for decisions like page counts, photographs, annotation style, appendixes, design, and so forth, would have left more space to focus on the scholarly editing aspect of the project. There was a lot that was unknown or in limbo while waiting to hear back from the publisher, which impacted the trajectory of the project because what we could be working on often hinged on whether the publisher had responded.

The other aspect of the project that could be improved upon was how the editorial teams functioned as individual units and as part of the whole. Our teams were randomly chosen and each group selected a team leader who was responsible for communicating group decisions and contributions with the instructor. However, it is possible that there is a benefit to forming groups in which students could self-select their role ahead of time. Such self-selection would ensure that students interested in leadership would get the type of experience they were looking for, and it would allow differentiation of responsibilities within groups (e.g., selecting sources, verifying source credibility, writing annotations, and editing written contributions into a cohesive piece). Allowing students

to sign up for specific responsibilities within their editorial team might alleviate the typical group project fears of overstepping or having members who do not fulfill their share of the work.

These possible adjustments aside, this textual recovery project was a standout experience in my undergraduate career, and I wish other courses had offered experiential learning with stakes similar to it. I particularly appreciated how the project armed me with experience that could go on my resume as its own line item rather than under a list of skills. I applied to graduate programs in the following semester, and my work coediting *Fidelity* was a major touchpoint for demonstrating what I am capable of and distinguishing me as an applicant. I have no doubt that I owe thanks to this scholarly editing project for the acceptance offers I received. The project also introduced me to the incredible power of recovering marginalized voices, and helped me develop skills I can use for similar work in the future.

Student Perspective #2: Michael Hodge

I had few expectations, or even general knowledge, of the editing and publishing industry before the start of this course. Although I wasn't exactly sure what my career goals were—even in my final semester of college—I had a feeling that the industry wasn't my calling. Despite my indifference toward this aspect of the class, it was the semester-long editing project that kept me in my seat week after week. From researching the sometimes antiquated words and contexts of Glaspell's novel to managing group expectations around publishing contracts, the project gave all students agency to form their own relationships with different elements of the editing and publishing process.

The project started with a fast-paced reading and class discussion of the book across six periods, followed by the assignment of small groups and section annotation. I felt this was enough time to finish the book and understand its themes well enough to review it in class. But some in my small group needed more time to digest our section, so we decided to spend the first meeting rereading our assigned section (chapters 25–29) before dividing our section into pages for individual work. Each group was then tasked with deciding on leadership; one person would serve as the “lead editor” of the group. The lead editor would maintain contact with Dr. McMullen to ensure progress and would make creative decisions if the group came to an impasse. The decision process was easy for us—I volunteered, and the four other members of my group accepted. Although I could see this leadership process causing strain within groups, the role of lead editor was not a particularly stressful or powerful position and so should not lead to conflict within the group.

To stay organized across our various meetings—both in and out of class—we took diligent notes of words or phrases that confused us. If an individual wrote a word or phrase in the document, it was their responsibility to research and record the meaning. Word definition was simple as the entire class used one common contemporary dictionary. However, defining and understanding contextual pieces was more challenging and required some outside research and reading. Because the library system at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln has a limited number of readily available reference materials, specifically regarding Susan Glaspell, most groups relied on the same ten books and articles, making cross-collaboration between groups critical. Many groups ended up sharing these resources out of convenience, which allowed us to understand the context in which Glaspell wrote. Such communication and collaboration between groups also allowed us to have insight into the thought process of other editorial teams, which we could bring into our own work. For example, when another group mentioned the

importance of regionalism in their section, we realized we could glean more material if we also read our section through that lens.

The final element of the project, which happened concurrently with our editing, was the communication and contract agreement between our class and the publisher. Due to both the back-and-forth nature of contract negotiations and additional communication between Dr. McMullen and the English Department, a lot of this work happened behind the scenes or before the semester started. Although the class occasionally had the opportunity to voice our opinions, such as submitting possible cover designs and approving the final contract before signing, I believe that a pre-established arrangement with the university and publisher would allow both the instructor and the class to spend less time bogged down in contract details and more time on scholarly editing. Such a standing arrangement could also free up time to reach out to interested scholars for endorsements, discuss appendix materials, and invite guest speakers.

Even though editing and publishing are not my calling, I gained a trove of information from our project. Throughout my collegiate experience, I have encountered annotated and scholarly texts. Creating this work myself gave me insight into how professional scholars approach texts as they study and analyze them. What I took out of the project wasn't just the opportunity to brag to friends and family that I am a published coeditor—or even the spots on my resume and curriculum vitae—but the hands-on experience of doing work that I had only seen extrinsically performed by well-established professionals many years removed from their own undergraduate education. Conducting historical and contextual research, group collaboration, and understanding audience perspective are all transferable skills that I have already used in my post-undergraduate career and on which I can lean as I reenter the world of academia and start my graduate career.

Instructor Perspective

Challenges

This sort of class is a *lot* of work for the instructor, both during the semester and beyond it. Even though the course ended in May, the project required many hours of work into late July, with further reviewing of page proofs the following spring. That said, I viewed the book project as teaching but also as research—it was, after all, going to result in an edited book with my name on it. There are also significant financial challenges to such a project. The press we worked with asked for a production fee of roughly 3,000, *which they lowered to about 2,500* after we waived our right to royalties. Luckily, my institution offers several grants for faculty, one of which expressly covers publication subvention costs for faculty projects. My application for the subvention grant was successful and, I would like to think, an easy sell, as the project was first and foremost a pedagogical exercise that resulted in a student-centered publication. I would hope that other institutions would be equally keen to provide grants to support student-centered work. Undoubtedly the biggest challenge is finding a press willing to take a chance on a book produced by students. But my experience suggests there may be more willingness than one would guess, particularly among trade imprints of small- to medium-size university presses.

Things I Wish We Did Differently

Ideally, I would have liked the students to be involved in the process of choosing which text we pitch to publishers. However, given the tight timeline, there's just no way that can happen in a single semester. I am considering, in future versions of the class, having students do some research toward the end of the semester and propose texts that could be edited by future classes, thus creating continuity and collaboration even between students in different semesters. Having students think about which texts to propose would also be a useful exercise in studying the subject areas of various presses and using such information either to tailor your pitch to a specific press or to choose a press that matches your chosen project. I also agree with the assessments of both student editors offered in this essay: a standing arrangement between a publisher and an instructor (or an institution) would reduce delays in the decision-making process and result in a clearer sense of the workflow—for both the instructor and the students—from the beginning of the class. However, given the uncertainty of funding for most academic and even commercial presses, I realize that such a standing agreement may not be practical or possible.

Thoughts/Tips for Instructors Wanting to Undertake a Similar Project

A project of this sort is, in my opinion, best suited to a skills- or methods-based course, rather than a content-based course. I struggle to envision having enough time to incorporate such a project into a traditional literary survey class, for instance. However, in a class focused on editing and publishing—meant to expose students (mainly English majors and minors) to skills and practices in a specific field—I was able to justify spending nearly all the semester focused on a single project, as a mode of experiential learning. My colleague who undertook a similar project is a historian and did so in an “Applied Historical Methods” course. Such a project could also be incorporated into a course on digital editing (my institution offers a course on “Digital Archives and Editions,” for example), with the end product being a digital edition of a forgotten text. Many of the same activities and steps described here would still apply, with the visits from editors and publishers (which were a regular feature of my course) replaced with the required technical/digital training.

If you want the project to result in a physical book, establishing a relationship and a connection with a publisher—long before undertaking such a project—is key. I was fortunate enough to have a tip from a colleague about a press that had proven to be interested in this sort of collaborative work with students. But, as noted, I could imagine that other small- to medium-size university presses might also have an interest, particularly under a non-peer-reviewed imprint. While larger presses have more resources, they are often (although not always) more set in their ways and have firmer existing commitments, making them less open to riskier projects. Also key is doing research into potential presses—their focuses and strengths—and then searching for compelling texts that fit one of them. If a book seems like a great fit for a press, I would like to think that the press would be interested in the book regardless of the mode by which it comes to them.

When approaching the press we ended up working with, I proposed three possible texts that the class might edit, all of which I thought would be of interest to both the students and the press. You should also, of course, select texts that you are ready to spend more than a year working with. I made a list of writers I was interested in whose works were in the public domain and then conducted research into such texts that were out of print. I came up with a list of candidates, narrowed it down to what I thought were the three most compelling, and then wrote up a one- to two-page proposal for each, which I then sent to the publisher.

Once the project begins, I think it is important to give students ample time to immerse themselves in the primary source material. While editorial discussions and tasks can be happening simultaneously, I would recommend spending the first several weeks of the semester reading and discussing—as you would in a “regular” literature or history class—the text to be edited. This both allows the students to gain a deeper understanding of the text they will be asked to introduce and annotate and shows them it is a “teachable” text, modeling for them the sort of interaction that future readers of our coedited book would have, should they be assigned to read it in a class (as we hope will be the case).

Final Thoughts and Takeaways

Students seemed to love this sort of hands-on work. I worried that some students would chafe at having to spend the entire semester working on a single project, but I didn’t encounter any evidence of that. On the contrary, students seemed to love the excuse to really dig into a series of tasks with a single clearly defined outcome. I also think it helped that the students were creating something for which they were one of the target audiences. The fact that our primary audiences were secondary and postsecondary classrooms, and the fact that students felt they had special insight into what was necessary and useful in a classroom edition, made them more enthusiastic about the project, and ultimately, I think, resulted in a better product.

The project was, in my opinion, a success in that it was a pedagogical exercise that resulted in very real-world exposure to the field to which the class was supposed to offer an introduction. While I am opposed to an exclusively career-driven view of a university education, I think there are nevertheless useful activities that we as instructors can undertake to demonstrate the “real-world application” of the skills that we teach every day. A project such as this clearly does so, and my English-major students can now hand their parents a book with their name on it and say, “*This* is something I can do with my degree.” The project also received broader public attention, with a feature story appearing in UNL’s weekly newsletter,⁵ as well as a front-page story in the local newspaper, complete with online video coverage of the class’s “book launch” event.⁶

But more importantly, such a project clearly demonstrates something that I try to impart to all my classes: textual recovery is one of the most powerful skills we have as humanities scholars, and one with the potential to have the broadest and longest-lasting effects among the largest number of people. Students are inspired by this power of bringing back a text from the dead—in this case, a lost text of a major Midwestern woman writer—giving it a better chance of getting into the hands of future generations, and they loved the opportunity to play a major role in how that text was prepared and presented. That is to say, many of the students learned that scholarly editing was pretty darn cool. And what better outcome could you ask for?

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 2. John Bryant, Mary Isbell, Christopher Ohge, and Mary Erica Zimmer, “Digital Editing and Pedagogy: Making Editions / Building Arguments,” *Scholarly Editing: The Annual of the Association for Documentary Editing* 41

(2024), <https://doi.org/10.55520/KBS01GGN>. ↵

3. I am grateful to Jason Stacy and his history classes at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville for their editorial work that inspired my own project. For the outcome of their work, see Edgar Lee Masters, *The New Star Chamber and Other Essays* (Saluki Publishing, Southern Illinois University Press, 2023). ↵
4. Susan Glaspell, *Fidelity: An Annotated Edition* (Saluki Publishing, Southern Illinois University Press, 2025).

For additional publication information please see: <https://www.siupress.com/9780809370177/fidelity/>. ↵

5. Deann Gayman, “Husker Students, Alumni Revive Pulitzer Winner’s Forgotten Novel,” *Nebraska Today*, October 29, 2025, <https://news.unl.edu/article/husker-students-alumni-revive-pulitzer-winners-forgotten-novel>. ↵
6. Chris Dunker, “UNL Students Bring Back to Life 1915 Novel Relegated to History,” *Lincoln Journal Star*, November 2, 2025, https://journalstar.com/news/local/article_e0e1e546-429f-42ec-9694-5e9ec1ba6d8b.html. ↵