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**Death Row Correspondence: Integrating  
the Ken Saro-Wiwa Archive Into an Undergraduate Program**

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**Abstract**

This article explores the integration of the Ken Saro-Wiwa Archive special collection into a module of the undergraduate curriculum at Maynooth University, Ireland. It describes the rationale for including the archive in an undergraduate course, the learning outcomes, and the experiences of the two authors in designing and delivering the module.

In November 2011, Sister Majella McCarron (OLA) donated to Maynooth University 28 letters and 27 poems she received from Nigerian writer and activist Ken Saro-Wiwa during the two years prior to his execution in 1995. Saro-Wiwa was arrested after leading a peaceful protest against environmental damage caused by oil extraction in his homeland, Ogoni in the Niger Delta. Despite widespread international protest, he was executed, along with eight others (the Ogoni Nine), by the Nigerian military regime in November 1995. McCarron lived for more than thirty years in Nigeria. She worked with Ken Saro-Wiwa publicizing the issue of environmental destruction in the Niger Delta and, on her return to Ireland in 1994; she campaigned internationally to save the lives of the Ogoni Nine. The letters, mostly handwritten, were smuggled out of military detention in food baskets. Subsequently, McCarron also donated photographs, flyers, articles, ephemera, and artefacts, including a cap that had belonged to Ken Saro-Wiwa and a flag of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP).

McCarron had kept the material for sixteen years among her personal belongings. As she approached her mid-seventies, she became concerned about the future of the collection and donated it to Maynooth University in November 2011. The university has strong associations with missionary activity and offers a range of courses dealing with social justice issues. The collection has now been catalogued and preservation work carried out on items requiring attention. In late 2012, Maynooth University completed a major extension to the Library, and the Ken Saro-Wiwa archive is now housed in a new Special Collections area that has custom-made space for storage, research, and exhibitions. The letters and poems were published with introductory essays in 2013 (Saro-Wiwa, 2013). In the same year, the Ken Saro-Wiwa Audio Archive, a collection of recordings of people connected with Ken Saro-Wiwa, was launched (Fallon & O'Brien, 2013).

This article describes the collaboration between the Maynooth University Library and the Department of Adult and Community Education at Maynooth University to use the collection in an undergraduate Development Studies module. This initiative was led by the two authors of this paper: the Deputy University Librarian and the Professor of Adult Education. We have both lived and worked in African countries and share a commitment to people-centred development. We are interested in creating learning environments where students are required to

- reflect on the values embedded in popular perceptions of development;
- consider whose interests are being served by specific development practices; and
- appreciate the social, economic and political complexities inherent in development and aid interventions.

This type of learning environment is ideally suited for the Development Theories module that is offered as part of the B.A. degree in Community Studies, one of a number of programs offered by Maynooth University designed to meet the specific needs of mature students. A key feature of the B.A. is its flexibility, which allows students to

progress at their preferred individual pace. This is possible because of the modular format, inbuilt credit accumulation, and recognition of accredited prior learning. Classes are held in the evening to serve adults who are unable to attend on a full-time basis during the day. Several departments contribute to the degree, including Adult & Community Education, Applied Social Studies, Anthropology, Sociology, Geography, and History.

### **Module Content**

Eighteen mature students opted to take the module. The learning objectives were as follows:

Students will

- be familiar with two main theories of development: modernisation and dependency;
- appreciate the different views of development embedded in these theories;
- be conscious of the values that colour their individual perspectives on development; and
- be able to utilise these theoretical frameworks to 'read' the world.

All students had opinions on development, based on the strong Irish tradition of large numbers of men and women joining Catholic missionary orders until the mid-twentieth century, the fundraising concerts of Irish rock star Bob Geldoff for famine relief in Ethiopia, and the high profile of Irish aid agencies in the national media. More than half the class had experienced socio-economic disadvantage either in Ireland or elsewhere. In deciding how to deliver the module, it was important to utilise an approach that would integrate theory and practice and would incorporate time for reflection and discussion so that the students could access and articulate what they already knew and felt about development. The educational significance of such a pedagogy is evident in the literature pertaining to radical adult education which emphasizes equality and social cohesion. Participative processes are important to enable learners to understand the causes of inequality and disadvantage. (O'Shea & O'Brien, 2011; Jarvis, 2010; Freire and Shore, 2003; Crowther, Martin, & Shaw, 2000).

In exploring the modernisation and dependency theories of development, the module drew on the following three case studies:

1. Peace keeping in post-civil war Liberia.
2. Climate change and hunger in Malawi.
3. The impact of the petrochemical industry on the Niger Delta.

Each of the case studies followed a similar pattern. The students heard the story of a person who was directly involved in the initiative being studied. That story was then considered in the light of modernisation and development theories. The first two case studies involved inviting people to class to tell their stories. In the case study about Liberia, the storyteller was an officer in the Irish Defence Forces who served as a United

Nations Peacekeeper in that country. In the Malawi case study, the storyteller was a Malawian academic who was involved in an Irish Aid funded project among four universities, including Maynooth. In the final case study about the petrochemical industry in the Niger Delta, the storytelling was done through the letters of Ken Saro-Wiwa.

### **Delivering the Module**

The authors jointly prepared and delivered the Niger Delta case study. The collaboration allowed the combining of expertise in collections and information sources and knowledge of development theory and practice to create an interesting learning experience for the students. In delivering the module, we sought to provide students with an understanding of the context in which Ken Saro-Wiwa campaigned, including the debate surrounding his execution, and to provide them with an opportunity to explore similar development issues in today's world. Using the letters and other material relating to Ken Saro-Wiwa allowed students the opportunity to develop skills in using and evaluating primary and secondary information sources and the opportunity to develop an appreciation of the aesthetic and research value of letters.

Our presence in the classroom allowed us to get to know the students and to adapt and adjust the module to meet their needs and concerns. There were a number of African students in the class, three of whom were Nigerian. One of them had met Ken Saro-Wiwa. His contribution to the class created a deep level of student engagement with the topic. As the module progressed, the contributions of the African students, as well as the use of the letter and artefacts, captured local nuances which can often be absent when encountering a topic from a distance.

Videos, including some covering the trial of Ken Saro-Wiwa, and other resources were made available via the Moodle Virtual Learning Environment that is used across the University. The trial videos are particularly moving because they show the courtroom drama and capture the voices and faces of all those involved. Other videos presented the opposing points of view of the impact of oil extraction in the Niger Delta. Videos produced that opposed the industry, such as Channel 4's documentary *The Drilling Fields*<sup>1</sup>, showed the destruction wrought by oil extraction. Those produced by the petrochemical industry presented the benefits to the community of investment by this industry in developing health, education, and other facilities in the area.

Students appreciated the range of resources used in the module as evidenced by the following feedback from a student:

The YouTube clips were invaluable in gaining a balanced perspective on Ken Saro-Wiwa's campaign as some contained extracts from his original manuscripts and the clips could not disguise what was actually taking place on the ground. All empowering and relevant primary sources.

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<sup>1</sup> The trailer for this documentary is available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SPpW3cm-zNw>

During class time students worked in small groups with a selection of articles covering the conflict in the Niger Delta. The articles were from newspapers, magazines and journals from different countries and different perspectives. The students were asked to compare and contrast coverage, comment on the different types of information sources, and summarise the group discussion.

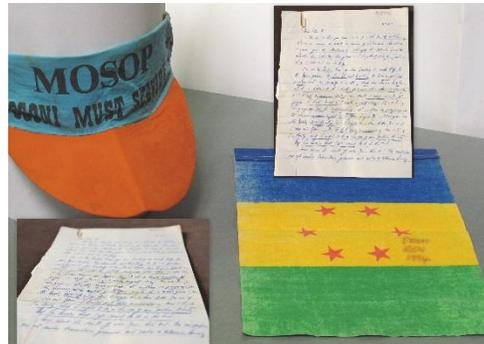
Students demonstrated an awareness of the types of sources and different perspectives as evidenced by this remark:

Truth is slippery. A lot depends on who you are talking to or what you are reading. I'm very conscious now of needing to know whose view I'm hearing and read more than one account.

Students were given access to Ken Saro-Wiwa's letters. Wearing appropriate protective gloves, they were allowed to handle original handwritten letters. This engagement with the physical collection was something they appreciated, and it was their first introduction to archives and special collection. One student commented:

The opportunity to actually see, hold and read original letters written by Ken Saro-Wiwa allowed for a real sense of his beliefs and passion to social and economic inequalities, most significantly his commitment to bring the plight of the Ogoni people to the world's attention.

The Ken Saro-Wiwa Archive was housed in the Russell Library, home to pre-1850 material and a major collection of Bibles, while a major extension to the main Library was being built that included a Special Collections Reading Room. In the Russell Library, the students had the opportunity to see a Khana Bible. Khana was Ken Saro-Wiwa's native tongue. This Bible is one of the few items written in Khana and dates from early missionary activity with the Ogoni. It was interesting for students to see the written language and to appreciate that, while Khana is widely spoken, it is not part of a written tradition. Ken Saro-Wiwa wrote in English and studied in English at school and university. The students also saw artefacts from the Archive, including a flag of Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People and a cap that belonged to Ken Saro-Wiwa.



Ken Saro-Wiwa Artefacts. Photograph by Alan Monahan. Copyright Maynooth University

One student expressed appreciation for this aspect of the program:

The opportunity given in this module to visit the Russell Library was wonderful and very beneficial. It was my first time in this library. The organizing of a well structured and very professional and informative

tour by Librarians enabled us to fully experience and learn about many of the wonderful special collections that the library holds.

Students identified development issues in today's world that have parallels with their case studies, such as ownership of natural resources, environmental pollution, competition between needs for employment and long term environmental consequences.

### Outcome

The 18 students were required to complete a 3,000 word assignment. They were free to draw on any or all of the three case studies presented in the module. The fact that sixteen of the eighteen students drew on the Niger Delta case study for their assignments indicated a high level of engagement with this particular case study.

Students felt a real sense of engagement with Ken Saro-Wiwa as evidenced by the this comment:

I really appreciated that Ken Saro-Wiwa was almost like a guest speaker in this module. We heard his voice and saw his face. I felt I got an insight into his experience in dealing with the causes and effects of development. This made such a difference in interpreting and relating the theories to real life situations, rather than just reading text. Also, for me personally, the assignment opened opportunity to question and challenge my own beliefs regarding the implications of development.

### Discussion and Conclusion

Special collections and archives provide an opportunity for students to encounter sources and artefacts that enable them to engage with complex controversial topics that may otherwise seem very removed. The use of such materials allows students to move beyond a purely information gathering approach to their learning, enables them to better critique knowledge, and exercises their curiosity by engaging with non-traditional personal sources such as the letters of Ken Saro-Wiwa.

Encountering personal artefacts stimulates a response that is not purely intellectual; it can also evoke a strong emotional response. If

undergraduate students are exposed to special collections, their learning is enhanced and they have greater awareness of the potential of such collections for their future learning and research.

Librarians and academic staff should work together more closely to integrate special collections (ideally in original form, but if not feasible, in digitised form) into the undergraduate curriculum. At present, these collections are mainly used by

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*Keep putting your thoughts on paper. Who knows how we can use them in future. The Ogoni story will have to be told!*

*Letter from Ken Saro-Wiwa to Sister Majella McCarron (December 1, 1993)*

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postgraduates undertaking specialised research. The visibility of these collections as a source for undergraduate work needs to be explored further. Librarians need to be involved in the various forums where discussion on the content and design of the curriculum take place, in order for them to promote the use of existing collections and to identify subject areas for potential special collection acquisition.

Through collaborations, such as the one described above, libraries can maximise use of their archives and special collections. Increasing visibility of such resources may also help to acquire funding for new special collections.

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