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Using Art to Promote Student Learning and Build Community Partnerships

Lynn S. Mullins and Ann V. Watkins

Abstract

In his vision for the "New Museum," John Cotton Dana advocated placing art close to books and journals, offering arts related programs, and developing an art collection to enhance visual learning. Dana Library, located on the Newark Campus of Rutgers-The State University of New Jersey, has succeeded in implementing these principles through its multifaceted arts program. Rotating fine arts and pedagogical exhibits along with a permanent art collection overrides the language and cultural differences of a diverse student body and the surrounding community. Interactions with the art support learning and self-discovery. The exhibit spaces and accompanying programming draw in New Jersey artists and local cultural organizations, strengthening the library's outreach and the campus's influence.

Anecdotes

Throughout the library, undergraduates from a writing class sit or stand before the paintings, photographs and prints in the permanent art collection. They are engaged as they record their reactions to the art. Their assignment is to view the art as text and to respond with supporting evidence from the work. According to the professor, the assignment has always succeeded in "convincing reluctant students that they could read and write critically."

On an evening in June 2001, hundreds of elementary through high school students from Newark flocked to Dana Library for an arts fair entitled "Arts Work for Children" that featured their work from an Essex County-based artists in the schools program. The children and their art were seemingly everywhere – in the Dana Gallery, in our multipurpose Dana Room, in one of the reading areas, and in the lobby. There were teachers, principals, and school art coordinators, as well as the artists and the students' families in the audience. The gallery cases and walls displayed ceramic sculptures, colorful masks, weavings, photos of street scenes, a nine-foot map depicting the "Arena" section of downtown Newark, and diaries in video format.

Late on a Friday afternoon in November, another successful Book Arts Symposium drew to a close. Approaching its fifteenth year, the Symposium attracts an audience from New Jersey, New York and Pennsylvania that includes artists, teachers, students, and other book arts aficionados. The day's program had begun

with a group art project, followed by a series of presentations by noted book artists. Their works filled the Dana Gallery display cases. Before a closing reception, the Symposium participants shared their creations with one another during a “Book Jam.” Although tired, the participants left feeling elated and energized.

These examples are representative of many milestones along the path of the John Cotton Dana Library’s (Rutgers-Newark Campus) evolving arts program. The program began with a vision to make the library an exciting and welcoming place for learning and creativity. The potential for learning and self discovery through the proximity of books and art had been promoted by the library’s namesake in the list of recommendations he presented in the early 1920s for the “New Museum” (Dana & Peniston, 1999).

When an expansion of the building was planned in the early 1990s, the library director incorporated a gallery and multipurpose room to help implement our vision of the library as an intellectual and cultural center. The renovated facility opened in October 1994, offering three exhibit spaces, the multipurpose room, and a small permanent art collection. Its works were purchased through New Jersey’s Arts Inclusion Act of 1978, which provides art for public spaces in state buildings.

Promoting Student Learning and Self-Discovery

Our student population is diverse with more than 75 countries represented. Many students work and may come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds where access to the arts has not been a possibility. The arts program overcomes any language, cultural or economic barrier to provide the students with an opportunity to interact with the art and learn about themselves. At any hour, whenever the library is open, students are taking in the art. The pedagogical exhibits in the lobby cases inform the student and other visitors about campus events or local history. They frequently attend the programs accompanying the exhibits. In November 2007, the lobby featured a display on the history of the Associated Press and included award winning photographs of the Vietnam War. The Associated Press Saigon Bureau Chief during the early 1970s was an invited speaker. His comments enabled the students and guests to compare journalism during the ongoing Iraqi War and the earlier conflict. In the example given in the Anecdotes section, a writing professor used the art to help her students learn. She recollects:

What I do remember is how students – and this includes students struggling with academic English and those reluctant to write, as well as those who enjoy writing—find their voice...They write about what they can see and what they can imagine. They talk back to the art; they question the artist. They remember a time when they created something important and believe they can do that again....They find vocabulary that they didn’t know they had and they begin to make meaning in new ways that spills into and

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nourishes their reading and writing. This is art and literature at its best--inspiring new ways of looking at and being in the world. (P. Bender, personal communication, May 13, 2007)

Building Campus and Community Partnerships

Dana's arts program supports community-building both on campus and in the city by exhibiting the work of local artists and by collaborations with academic departments and Newark's cultural institutions. By drawing the community into a learning and creative space, Dana has forged relationships with local Portuguese, Chinese-American, and African American groups, among others. Other partners include the Newark Public Schools, the Newark Public Library, and the Newark Museum. As one example, a campus employee and a few Portuguese residents in Newark lent exhibit items for Dana to display while a Portuguese language conference was held on campus. This led to a stronger tie with the Portuguese Consulate in Newark (the Consul had also contributed some exhibit items). The Consulate staff and the campus provost and faculty worked together to initiate a Portuguese Language and Culture program with the Portuguese government providing a faculty member through the Camoes Institute, an agency that promotes the Portuguese language worldwide. The Institute has also provided Dana with a substantial number of Portuguese language titles to circulate and it has outfitted a room in the library that is used as a learning lab for the students in the Portuguese Language and Culture program.

The arts program provides opportunities to partner with other departments on campus. Among many noteworthy examples, Dana and the Institute on Ethnicity, Culture, and the Modern Experience co-sponsored an exhibit organized by the curator of the Jewish Historical Society of MetroWest in April, 2007. The display described the early history of Newark Beth Israel Hospital, still operating in Newark, with photographs, books, medical instruments and other memorabilia. These items were presented in cases made from old hospital beds. Each of our exhibits is accompanied by an opening reception with a program of speakers, allowing a dialog between speaker and audience. Following the program for the Newark Beth Israel exhibit, the Institute had an initial showing of a documentary about Newark. Several people, on their way from one event to the other, voiced their surprise and pleasure at the value and quality of both events and said that they planned to return to campus.

Inspiration, Learning, and Creativity

While the fine arts exhibits and the pieces in the permanent art collection record the inspiration and creativity of the artists, the display items themselves may become objects of inspiration. Not long ago, an artist toured one of the

exhibitions drawn from the collections of the Institute of Jazz Studies, an archive devoted to jazz studies and affiliated with Dana Library. After seeing Billie Holiday's plastic gardenia, she began to wonder about the great jazz singer. Her reflections led to a significant series of prints

With increasing involvement in art selection and placement, we developed a deeper appreciation and an "eye" for good art. Seven of our librarians and staff are involved in quality art or photography projects that merited exhibition—mosaics, ceramics, Chinese watercolors, and jazz photography—and we have been happy to show their work.

And finally, we believe that our arts program is very much in the tradition of John Cotton Dana, who pioneered openness and who put contemporary art together with books and journals for the public to enjoy, believing that the modern library should provide all of these resources. In his day, Dana presented the library as a vital intellectual and cultural center, and that is what we, in his city today, have tried to bring about.

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References

Dana, J. C., & Peniston, W.A. (1999). *The new museum: Selected writings*. Newark, NJ; Washington, DC: Newark Museum Association; American Association of Museums.