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**Visualizing History: Using Museum Skills to Teach Information Literacy to
Undergraduates**

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Abstract

Baruch College began an information studies minor that reinforces the principles of information literacy. However, it did not employ the visual to teach information literacy skills. To fill this gap, a new course, using the process of researching and preparing an exhibit script to teach undergraduates information literacy skills, was developed. In this course students have the opportunity to become creative, while at the same time learning the organizational and research skills needed to compose exhibit proposals, write labels and press releases and finally to produce an exhibit script.

Keywords

Exhibits

Information literacy

Information studies

Museums

Baruch College, a part of the City University of New York, has been in the forefront of library education for undergraduates since the 1970s. It began by offering credit courses in research skills in the social sciences and humanities as well as in business. Students learned about sources for finding information in addition to the organizational skills needed for successful research and writing. By 2005, the college, established a minor in information studies designed to aid students in meeting the challenges of the new information age (Roff 2007). All of the program's new courses taught and reinforced the principles of information literacy. Information literacy teaches students to locate, evaluate and use information with the aim of making students life-long learners (Stylianopoulos 2005) To date, Baruch students have been offered advanced courses such as Economics of Information, Principles of Information Retrieval, Archives, Documents and Hidden History, Information and Society, Electronic Resources and Research Methods for Writers, and Social Informatics. As all of them have been well received classes fill quickly. However, even with this rich offering, there was one area not yet covered—using the visual to teach information literacy skills. The visual goes beyond the written word and is concerned with all illustrative materials including but not limited to images, artifacts, pictures, maps, advertisements, and websites. The author felt that using exhibit planning which combines the visual with the written word, as a tool to teach information literacy would be a new and interesting addition to our department's course offerings.

The elementary school trip to a local historical society or museum is something that is remembered by most individuals of their primary school education. Museums are considered essential to providing a well-rounded educational experience for children of

all ages by exposing them to a broad range of subject areas and experiences that can translate into excellent learning tools. Following a trip to an historical society or museum, the classroom teacher can incorporate into the curriculum what the museum educator presented to the students. These visual sources of information used for decades by schoolchildren can and should be integrated into the undergraduate experience to help enhance the research and writing skills of students.

Stylianopoulos views the bigger picture of information literacy as "...applying the concept to the research that is before you. A life-long learner should be able to adapt the training equally to visual or text driven research" (76). There are many published articles on information literacy and the visual, and they focus on topics such as incorporating digital images into library services and using visual images to promote student learning skills. Much of the literature views no role for the librarian in teaching visual literacy. Nelson states that "Teaching how images (such as a political poster dating back to the French Revolution) are constructed, organized or expressed to communicate meaning goes as much beyond the role of librarians as the teaching of any other discipline-specific content (such as Robespierre's concept of liberty)" (2004, 8). She is not alone in excluding visual literacy from a library instructional program. In order to implement the teaching of visual literacy to undergraduates, a change in the institutional culture of undergraduate libraries needs to take place. According to Marcum, "The profession must expand its definition of librarianship to include new forms of expertise—as happened for archivists and systems librarians—to encompass the skills of presentation, content management, and visualization, and must recast the model of information literacy to embrace multiple literacies and sociotechnical competencies" (2002, 202).

The museum profession has already embraced information literacy skills as necessary for museum professionals. Marty conducted interviews with museum professionals who were questioned about working with information tools in museums. He found that museum administrators were adapting to the changing needs of museum patrons by encouraging their staff to hone their information literacy skills through professional development (2006). “The success of museums in the 21st century depends largely on the abilities of a newly emerging group of information professionals specifically trained to deal with the problems of museum informatics and the information needs of museum visitors and professionals” (331).

In the same way that museum professionals are adapting to their clientele, librarians, as Marcum advocates, must do the same for their patrons. The inclusion of information literacy skills in course work is essential to graduating information literate students from our colleges and universities. Stylianopoulos advocates and uses visual resources in her library instruction program when teaching art and architecture classes, and other educators have incorporated visual literacy to other very specific subject fields. The Baruch model crosses discipline lines and students use information literacy principles both visual and textual, that they learn throughout the semester and then apply them to their final project.

“Visualizing History: Exhibits for Museums and Libraries,” is probably not a course that one would expect to be offered in a college where a good percentage of its students concentrate on business subjects. Baruch College is located in the heart of New York City where museums, galleries and historical societies are vital to the rhythm of city life. A college graduate regardless of his/her major field of study should be aware of and

appreciate the cultural environment whether as a participant or as an observer. This course is just one small step in that direction. The aim is not to make students museum exhibit professionals, but rather to teach them to incorporate information literacy skills into the writing of an exhibit script instead of a term paper. This is a new idea, and creating a syllabus for the course was a significant challenge.

Before developing the syllabus, two questions needed to be addressed. First, what skills are needed to actually produce an exhibit, and second, what role does information literacy play? Having curated exhibits, the author knew that research and organizational skills are of paramount importance in taking an exhibit idea and carrying it through to a finished product. With a time frame usually in place the curator does not have the luxury of tangential research and must pinpoint what information is necessary.

The skills taught throughout the course culminate in the final project of writing an exhibit script. The exhibit script includes a proposal, bibliography, a marketing plan, an outline, the text for all labels and signage, and a listing of all visuals that will be used in the final exhibit. While little literature exists on museum or library exhibit script writing, or how this skill can be used to teach information literacy, there are numerous articles on integrating information literacy into undergraduate course work. As authors vary regarding their approaches, there is no consensus on how this should be accomplished. Norgaard puts forth an argument for a partnership between writing courses and library instruction. "Information literacy, in short, can help liberate composition from its four classroom walls and from the field's narrow association with one college course, lending it the broader social, civic, and intellectual relevance that its rhetorical roots demand" (2004, 226). Mackey and Jacobson introduce three models for teaching information

literacy in undergraduate courses. They feel that these models demonstrate “the potential to extend IL instruction beyond the library and general education,...” (2004, 223) The first model is the art of annotation which teaches students to do research both in the library and online and to integrate the information they locate into an annotated bibliography. The second model is research and composition where students are instructed to use discipline specific resources in a research paper. The final model is writing for the web which provides students the opportunity to develop content for the web with a focus on primary and secondary research methods (202).

Writing an exhibit script is not much different from writing a research paper. However, while the same skills are needed, the visual becomes the focus and students must begin to think in a multi-dimensional way. Students in “Visualizing History” have an opportunity to become creative while also learning the skills that are the focus of the course.

The semester begins with an overview of the museum world by highlighting types of museums, defining museum terminology, and providing a basic introduction to the history of museums in the United States. Early in the term students take class trips to museums and/or galleries to be introduced to the visual experience and learn how curators tell their stories with text and visuals. These visits serve to support one of the course objectives, which is to explain and identify the role of museums in disseminating information in society. Often neglected in higher education, the role of museums has evolved from a repository for curiosities in the 18th century to an educational institution with staffs of trained educators in the 21st century. Since education is a primary function of museums, it follows that the exhibits that they house need to conform to the same

standards of research as other forms of scholarship. Meager sees a revolution among historical museums in their new expanded roles and their adherence to professional standards. “At the same time their staffs have professionalized, become steeped in the most relevant scholarly literature and committed themselves to rigorous standards of historical scholarship” (Meager 1998, 131). Museums often employ trained scholars as consultants or guest curators to assure the accuracy of their exhibits.

There are moral and ethical issues involved in all types of scholarship, and developing exhibits often means balancing the concerns and demands of all of the constituents involved in the exhibit process. One of ACRL’s (Association of College and Research Libraries) information literacy standards is to insure that students are cognizant of the economic, legal, and social issues of assessing and using information (American Library Association 2008). Consequently, the second unit of the course addresses another, course objective—namely, to analyze the ethical, legal, and cultural issues that museums must consider when organizing public exhibits. Museum exhibits are often contentious; touching on issues such as what role should stakeholders have in the exhibit development, should controversial exhibits receive public funding, or should exhibits explore sensitive issues such as race, religion or ethnicity. The American Association of Museums’ 1993 Code of Ethics serves as important guidelines for exhibit teams (American Association of Museums). Students in “Visualizing History” are made aware of the code and its implications to the preparation of their final exhibit script. In addition, issues of copyright and free speech are injected into the curriculum, topics for which exhibit curators are often criticized. The readings for the unit include several articles, one of which is “The Ethics of Exhibitions: On the Presentation of Religious Art” (Worth

2004). In it the author presents a case study in which a Christian university that houses an art museum interprets the religious art that is part of its collection in its own way, and uses the art works that it exhibits to illustrate how the Catholic Church is incorrect in its doctrines. The moral and ethical implications of this are discussed and the author concludes that while the museum has not really done anything wrong, a moral concern remains. Other readings include an article on American Indians and their right to participate in writing the story that a museum tells when interpreting their heritage for a museum exhibit. These readings as well as the others assigned provide students with an understanding of moral and ethical issues common in the museum world; they also have implications of which an information literate student should be aware. Consequently, standard five of the ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education, is addressed. "The information literate student understands many of the economic, legal, and social issues surrounding the use of information and accesses and uses information ethically and legally" (American Library Association 2008). Once students are aware of moral and ethical issues that they might encounter when selecting a topic to focus on for the semester, they are then ready to move to the third unit of the course which covers writing a proposal for an exhibit, making decisions as to the objectives and goals of the exhibit, and the fundamentals of actually preparing the exhibit.

Before any exhibit can become a reality, the research process must take place. Unit four introduces students to the basic research skills needed to effectively find information on a topic. Locating appropriate collections in libraries and museums, using overview sources, preparing a bibliography, finding primary and secondary source

materials, and organizing information are all appropriate skills needed to research an exhibit and write an exhibit script. The importance of undergraduates developing research skills are now more important than ever since many students believe that Google searches will provide all the information needed to complete their assignments.

The actual writing of a script involves creativity, team-work, and problem solving. At this point, the student must evaluate the research that he/she has done and decide what to use and how to organize the actual exhibit script. The art of writing successfully to the intended audience and communicating the desired message are important lessons which students need to learn; unit five focuses on these skills. "Like other cultural and educational media, exhibitions are about people communicating with each other" (McLean 1999, 105). In addition, deciding on what objects, pictures or documents to use for the exhibit is also covered in this unit. To insure visual literacy for the 21st century, students need to develop the necessary skills to make decisions regarding what is presented to them in this visually rich and technologically driven world. "Just as writing is essential to textual literacy, the capacity to manipulate and make meaning with images is a core component of visual literacy" (Felton 2008, 61). By completing unit five, the students have satisfied another of the ACRL Information Standards. "The information literate student evaluates information and its sources critically and incorporates selected information into his or her knowledge base and value system" (American Library Association, 2008).

While an exhibit can be well-researched and display significant artifacts, to insure that the desired message will be communicated to the audience, the explanatory text must be skillfully crafted. "As the preferred medium of the field, exhibit labels are the essential

tool of the curator, educator, and exhibit developer. They function as the primary link between museum meaning and visitor understanding” (Faron 2003, 31). Unit six builds on the previous unit by focusing students on writing labels for their exhibits in a concise, well-organized manner with accurate documentation. The ability to document the sources where information came from is a skill required of an information literate student.

Objects can tell powerful stories, and, when used in an exhibit, they must be adequately researched. Students often rely on on-line images of artifacts, documents, or other visual representations to use in their final exhibit script, and it must be stressed that the same documentation is needed as if they were to actually exhibit the real object. The use of on-line sources expected in the 21st century requires that the technology driven student needs to learn the correct protocol for documentation so as not to use these sources indiscriminately. This unit incorporates all of the ACRL Information Standards previously met during the semester, and in addition also fulfills the last of the standards. “The information literate student, individually or as a member of a group, uses information effectively to accomplish a specific purpose” (American Library Association).

Getting the message to the public is an important part of the exhibit process. This means that for an exhibit to be successful, the targeted audience must be notified of the upcoming exhibit. Whether advertising campaigns are used or simple notices are placed in magazines and newspapers, communicating to an exhibitor’s constituencies is the ultimate goal. Marketing for a museum or library exhibit is a complicated process which cannot be covered in one or two class sessions, but honing in and discussing the skills that are necessary for a successful marketing strategy is a beginning. The press release

and how to prepare one in an organized, well thought-out manner are also included in the discussion. To reinforce the objectives of this unit, the assigned readings include “Releases: Impressing the Press,” which highlights basic steps in preparing a press release, and “Can museums be all things to all people?: Missions, goals and marketing’s role,” which addresses marketing to a museum audience (Rose 2005; Kotler and Kotler 2000). The subject matter of this unit incorporates several of the ACRL Information Standards.

Evaluation is the assessment of exhibitions in the context of effectiveness. Did the exhibit reach the desired audience? Did the exhibit have the preferred educational outcome? Was anything omitted which would have helped tell the story better? Was the physical setting good? These are some of the questions that need to be answered when evaluating an exhibit. Whether it is evaluating reference sources or Websites, it is accepted among the library community that these are important skills for students to master in their undergraduate years. In this course, students learn about evaluation through readings focusing on the evaluation of museum exhibits. The concept that whether one is a museum curator or a student writing a research paper involves answering to a higher power who will assess your product; this brings home the importance of evaluation. Students read an article by Rounds, “Measure for Measure: Purpose and Problems in Evaluating Exhibitions,” which presents the basic tenet of museum exhibit evaluation (Rounds 2001). In addition, the other reading for this final unit supports the importance of evaluating exhibits to insure that all museum constituencies are satisfied.

The assignments, class lectures, and readings culminated in students producing exhibit scripts. The subject of the exhibit was their choice, and the author encouraged them to pick a topic of interest to them. This final assignment gave them an opportunity to use their own creativity as well as research skills. As one would expect there was a wide range of topics chosen, and students visited museums, interviewed people, and used real and virtual research materials to complete the project. They presented their findings to the class and the results were outstanding. The students incorporated all of the skills covered during the semester and added a touch of their own imagination to produce attractive, well-designed and well-researched exhibits.

The author has recently completed a second semester of teaching “Visualizing History: Exhibits for Museums and Libraries.” Feedback on the course has been positive with students sending e-mails saying that they benefitted from the course. One senior wrote: “As a senior, this was one of the few classes I have taken at Baruch that encouraged me to expend my creativity toward something completely of my own choice.” Another student wrote: “I wanted to sincerely thank you for a wonderful semester. I learned so much about the extensive process of how exhibits come together from start to finish. I loved visiting museums and exhibits before, but now I view them much more critically.”

Baruch College has formal student course and faculty evaluations which are completed by the students at the end of each semester. The results of the first semester this course was taught were very encouraging. The highest number that any question can get is 5.0. One section of the questionnaire was “Course Contents” and there are several questions in this category. The first question is whether the course is well-organized and

the score was 4.69. The next questions were did the instructor communicate the course objectives and learning goals and did the assignments contribute to meeting the course objectives and learning goals. Both of these questions scored 4.69. The last two questions in this section were whether the course requirements were clearly stated and were the required materials and books helpful. The scores were 4.63 and 4.31. Another section of the evaluation was "Course's Impact on You." One question wanted the students to rate how much the course improved their oral communication skills, and another their written communication skills. The score for the first question was 4.00, and for the second question 4.13. The course is a work in progress and the evaluations for the last semester that "Visualizing History" was taught are not yet tabulated, but what is apparent is that students have definitely embraced this new approach to teaching the skills necessary to be information literate in the 21st century.

There is no way to predict the technological innovations that the 21st century will bring. The way information is delivered will likely change in the future, but what is certain to remain constant is the need for students to understand how to locate, evaluate and use information. "Visualizing History: Exhibits in Museums and Libraries" used an innovative method to teach information literacy skills. A variety of models needs to be developed in colleges and universities to assure that students will be fully prepared to take on the challenges of the 21st century.

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