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Zines in the Classroom: Critical Librarianship and Participatory Collections

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CHAPTER 15*

Zines in the Classroom

Critical Librarianship and Participatory Collections

Robin Potter and Alycia Sellie

Introduction

Since the 1990s, an increasing number of libraries have added the alternative publications known as zines to their collections. Zines are do-it-yourself projects: self-published magazines, usually made in small editions on a photocopier. Zines add value to library collections by bringing unique and often un(der)represented viewpoints into conversation with traditionally published materials. Beyond the work that librarians do to gather and preserve zines, we believe that these materials should be a site for collaborative and critical teaching about the political nature of information.

Zines give librarians an opportunity to “move away from the demonstration of technical search processes and simplistic claims that certain sources are ‘authoritative’ because authorities have decided that they are” and to make this questioning of authority explicit.¹ These materials challenge traditional notions of authority in their construction and in their content; they go outside publishing norms and conventions.² Zines can also be used to promote information literacy and critical thinking and to inspire students to challenge traditional notions of credibility, access, scholarship, and copyright.

Kimberly Creasap argues that zine-making itself employs feminist ped-

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agogy in three ways: through participatory learning, validation of personal experience, and the development of critical-thinking skills.³ We embrace these elements in our zine sessions, as we likewise consider what place social justice needs to take in our classroom and what role collaboration, empowerment, and care have in our limited time with students.⁴ As we construct zines in these sessions alongside students, we “embrace a collective questioning of how information is constructed, disseminated, and understood.”⁵

This lesson plan describes a one-shot session for undergraduate classes. We also imagine it could be adapted for drop-in workshops or library events. We have taught this plan in academic libraries, but it could be adjusted for other audiences.

If your library does not already hold a zine collection, you could partner with an existing library, start your own library collection, or purchase a selection of titles to use for the class. Growing your own collection does not require a steep financial investment—most zines cost only a few dollars and could later be donated to a library or shared among instructors. (See more information on each of these options in our appendix 15A).

Learning Outcomes

- Contribute to class discussion
- Spend time reading and experiencing zines
- Consider how library collections and archives work as historical repositories, critically exploring the ways that library collections do or do not reflect local communities
- Create a one-page zine

Materials

- Printed pages of Anne Elizabeth Moore’s “How to Make This Very Zine,” a self-referential zine that illustrates how it is constructed⁶
- A few pairs of scissors for the class to share

Preparation

- Curate a collection of zines to share in the session. Because of the wide variety of ways that people create zines, offering items that display a range of construction methods can make visible the breadth of their content.
- Decide whether to keep the zines from your collection separate from zine-making materials. Separating zine-making from zine reading or

discussion can be less overwhelming in the flurry of folding and cutting (and less physically threatening to permanent collections!).

Session Instructions

The order of these activities and discussions could be rearranged, depending on the dynamics of the class:

1. *Sharing zines.* Arrange selected zines somewhere in the classroom. Invite students to browse the materials. If space is limited, a stack of zines could be passed among students, and traded or exchanged throughout the class.
2. *Activity.* Construct a copy of “How to Make This Very Zine,” by Anne Elizabeth Moore, a small eight-page zine that can be made from just one 8½-inch-by-11-inch sheet of paper.⁷ Show the class how to fold and cut a few times until they all have made the zine, encouraging students to help one another. Discuss the simplicity of making this zine with everyday materials and how it could be duplicated if they wanted to distribute multiple copies. The content of the zine illustrates the steps we perform together as a class. Students keep their own copy of the completed zine.
3. *Reading zines.* Time for reading and exploration may occur at the start of class as students arrive in the room, at the end of the session after the activity and discussions, or for short periods throughout (e.g., “Everyone take five minutes to read, and then we will discuss ____”). Encourage students to examine as many zines as they like during the session, and let them know how they can access the collection or find other zines after their class has ended.
4. *Discussion.* Below are a few questions that library instructors could pose within discussions about zines (regardless of the content of the materials).

Our approach for these discussions was modeled from Ira Shor’s framing of critical teaching for librarians,⁸ and his belief that “critical education prepares students to be their own agents of social change, their own creators of democratic culture.”⁹ These conversations work well if the discussion remains speculative rather than authoritative and if the instructor can prompt students to think about what relationship each object might have to other experiences they bring into the classroom with them.

- **What is a zine?**

Ask for definitions from the class, based on what they observe in front of them and around the room—e.g., “What are the common elements you see in multiple zines?” Additionally, instructors can call into focus the complexities of defining zines because there are so many examples that push boundaries.

Exceptions to definitions could be found by again contrasting materials around the room in variations of form or content.¹⁰ As zine histories branch in many directions, discussion of these histories can also be focused on observation; students can talk about other publications zines remind them of and can connect zines to other traditions—what evidence of these connections can they see from the materials in front of them?¹¹

- **What trends and genres might be unique to zines?**

Students can be asked to describe a zine and what genre they think it could fit within or share other impressions about its content and construction.¹² Or ask students to create names for what they see and compare and contrast with other genres they know in literature or other disciplines. Discuss how some topics within zines cross boundaries or are so specialized that there may not be any other publication created that speaks to that same issue (yet). How might this relate to other media (or not)?

- **Why would someone make a zine today (instead of a blog or website?)**

This discussion can guide students to consider zines' ability to address topics that might be considered niche, how they can be used to build relationships with like-minded people, the role of anonymity in print and online, the difference in immediacy and connectivity dependent on media. Discussion of copyright fits well here: Is collage legally and socially acceptable? How might this compare and contrast with activities online?

- **Why are zines important to have in this library?**

The class can talk about the relationship between the materials collected by libraries and the materials used by researchers in their scholarship. How do zines function in library collections? Do they lower barriers to entry? Prompt students to think about their library 50 or 100 years in the future. How might their own daily lives be represented (or go unrepresented)? How can having a zine collection shape historical records, or disrupt them?

5. *Activity.* If your zine collection is cataloged, look at a zine record to examine how inclusion of this content in discovery tools can influence scholarly conversation. You may want to preselect a few examples to show the class. We demonstrated a search for the subject *Bengali Americans*. At the time,

from a list of only six titles assigned that heading, two of these were zines by Bengali American activist Jordan Alam.

Assessment

Assessment of zine sessions is based on observation within the classroom as well as student involvement after the sessions. Rather than skills-based testing or checking to see whether knowledge has been banked, we have evaluated the success of these sessions informally, based on discussions within the classroom (and afterward) and students' demonstrated interest and participation. Beyond what we experience in class, we have assessed these sessions based on feedback from classroom faculty and through ongoing student involvement in the zine collection.

Reflections

Zines have allowed us to change and critique the ways that library collections are built, and they inspired us to reframe our role as instructors, forming stronger connections with students. Zines offer an alternative to teaching about information as an unfamiliar commodity that exists outside of our own lives and the lives of our students.

When students leave our classroom, they have already made a zine. They are invited to add their own work to the same collections that we examine together in class. When we teach, we present our zine collection as open and unfinished—or as editable as *Wikipedia*. We bring conversation (and critique) about libraries as living and cyclical repositories. In these sessions, we explore how participatory zine collections can help us access the past as well as transform the future.

Final Questions

- How are students' or local communities' everyday lives represented in or excluded from library collections? What can library instruction do to break down barriers to entry?
- Why are zines important to have in library collections? How can zines bring new ideas into libraries? If a zine collection is not an option, what are other ways to include community voices in libraries?
- How can offering time for reading and exploring content and real-time observation in class reframe our teaching and connection to students?

Appendix 15A: Zine Resources

Resources for Creating a Zine Collection

- Bartel, Julie. *From A to Zine: Building a Winning Zine Collection in Your Library*. Chicago: American Library Association, 2004.
- “Articles on Zine Librarianship,” Librarian Discourse, Barnard Zine Library. <https://zines.barnard.edu/librarydiscourse>.<https://zines.barnard.edu/librarydiscourse>.
- ZineLibraries.info. Zine Libraries Interest Group website. <http://zinelibraries.info>.[http://zinelibraries.info/](http://zinelibraries.info).
- Zine Librarians. E-mail group website. <https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/zinelibrarians/info>.

Resources for Finding a Zine Library or Collection

- Lists of Zine Libraries (including DIY or community collections)
 - Barnard Zine Library website. <https://zines.barnard.edu/zine-libraries>.<https://zines.barnard.edu/zine-libraries>.
 - Zine Wiki. http://zinewiki.com/Category:Zine_Library.http://zinewiki.com/Category:Zine_Library.

Resources for Purchasing Zines

- Stolen Sharpie Revolution’s lists:
 - “Zine Events & Zine Fests” (festivals where zines are sold and traded). <http://www.stolensharpievolution.org/events>.
 - “Zine Distros” (distributors). <http://www.stolensharpievolution.org/zine-distros>.
 - “Stores That Sell Zines.” <http://www.stolensharpievolution.org/stores-that-sell-zines>.
- Zine Wiki’s “List of Distros.” http://zinewiki.com/List_of_Distros.http://zinewiki.com/List_of_Distros.
- We Make Zines (a social networking website for zine-makers where zines and how to place an order for them are often listed). <http://wemakezines.ning.com>.
- Zines for sale on Etsy. <https://www.etsy.com/c/books-movies-and-music/books/zines-and-magazines/zines><https://www.etsy.com/c/books-movies-and-music/books/zines-and-magazines/zines>.

Notes

- Jonathan Cope, "Information Literacy and Social Power," in *Critical Library Instruction*, ed. Maria T. Accardi, Emily Drabinski, and Alana Kumbier (Duluth, MN: Library Juice Press, 2010), 25.
- Stephen Duncombe, *Notes from Underground* (New York: Verso, 1997).
- Kimberly Creasap, "Zine-Making as Feminist Pedagogy," *Feminist Teacher* 24, no. 3 (2014): 156, doi:10.5406/femteacher.24.3.0155.
- Maria Accardi, *Feminist Pedagogy for Library Instructors* (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2013), 29.
- Cope, "Information Literacy," 25.
- Anne Elizabeth Moore, "How to Make This Very Zine," 2004, <http://anneelizabethmoore.com/how-to-make-this-very-zine>.<http://anneelizabethmoore.com/how-to-make-this-very-zine/>.
- Ibid.
- See Alycia Sellie, "Critical Pedagogy and Library Instruction Report Back," *Alycia's Blog*, May 09, 2010, <http://alycia.brokenja.ws/content/critical-pedagogy-and-library-instruction-report-back>.<http://alycia.brokenja.ws/content/critical-pedagogy-and-library-instruction-report-back>.
- Ira Shor, *Critical Teaching and Everyday Life* (Boston: South End Press, 1980), 48.
- For a short introduction to zine definitions, see Alycia Sellie, "A Do-It-Yourself Zine Definition," *Counterpoise* 9, no. 3 (2005): 8.
- For an overview of zine histories, see Doug Blady, "Zines Timeline," accessed October 11, 2015, http://defenseof.voelkermorris.com/zine_time.html.
- For more context on zine genres and content, see Alex Wreck, *Stolen Sharpie Revolution* (Portland, OR: Lunchroom Publishing, 2014), and Julie Bartel, *From A to Zine* (Chicago: American Library Association, 2004).

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