Engaging Students as Curators

Having the opportunity to design an exhibit [...] allowed the student serving as curator to practice the semester’s skills. Seeing community members engage with their work made them realize that classroom skills and archival work can create impacts beyond one term’s assignment, and that they can help folks explore objects from the past in the context of the present.

(Dr. Jess FitzPatrick, Instructor for the first student-led Digital Interactive Wall exhibit as part of the “Projects in Digital Composition” course, Fall 2020)

The University of Pittsburgh Library System’s (ULS) Hillman Library values student creation and curation. Centering student voices in exhibit craft provides opportunities for experiential learning and public scholarly communication. It also fosters learning and critical conversations among visitors to the library. Over the past three years, I have facilitated student-led curation and programming of the Digital Interactive Media Wall located in our Archives & Special Collections Gallery. This poster details the processes I have developed for collaborative works of a variety of faculty and students across the University of Pittsburgh.

I started by conducting outreach to teaching faculty who had already visited Archives & Special Collections with their students in past semesters, encouraging them to explore integrating curation and exhibition into their curriculum. I also met with students working on faculty-directed independent research projects about exhibit curation as a way of showcasing their work in conversation with library resources— including Honors College Creative Arts Fellows.

I created tools for communicating expectations and evaluating student collaborations, including an exhibit request form for faculty and a Preliminary Exhibit Guide for growing students' literacy of library resources. This guide includes our Preliminary Exhibit Collections Exhibits System & other local archives to express their thoughts on gender roles, pollution, and politics by incorporating rare materials into digital collages. One student's piece here creatively explored themes of lesbian and queer invisibility by “remixing” illustrations of paired feminine figures throughout time with the research "We Are Lesbians" from 1970 publication Lavender Vision, held by the University of Pittsburgh Library System.

Facilitating Student Curation

When I got to the process of interacting with older scores in the Theodore Finney Music Library, it completely opened my eyes to how much care is required for the little details of research [and curation] (descriptions, placement, media, the works!). (Chloe Wiess, "Undergraduate student curator of the Program Get Well with the Program: A Guide to Musical Analysis and Storytelling, including Archival Comparisons")

My experience has taught me that successful facilitation of student-exhibits includes developing the students’ literacy of the exhibition tool while helping them hone their primary source literacy skills.

The Digital Interactive Wall’s custom features and audience requires students to present information differently than they are accustomed to doing in a research paper. Custom Digital Interactive Wall features include map and timeline based templates for organizing content, character limits, and an attract sequence that features research questions. The wall is visited by students, staff, faculty, contractors, Pittsburgh community members and campus visitors, all of whom have different experiences and knowledge of exhibit topics. This modal shift can be especially overwhelming for students who are learning how to conduct primary source research for the first time.

I meet student curators where they’re at, building skills through hands-on mentorship and regular instructional check-ins:

- Assessing student skill level with necessary tools (like Microsoft Excel and library catalog)
- Creating support for time management in the form of a timeline with important exhibit milestones with time estimates
- Rotating concepts to their experiences outside the exhibit
- Building at least 2 minute check-ins throughout the project
- Explaining terminology
- Problem-solving collaboratively

(Left) Photograph of “Remixing the Archive: Students use Archives & Special Collections @ Pitt to Create Visual Arguments,” curated by David Mash (Pitt undergraduate student in Computer Science and Music) on behalf of Dr. Jessica FitzPatrick’s Projects in Digital Composition course.

In this exhibit, students used archives of Pittsburgh Library System & other local archives to express their thoughts on gender roles, pollution, and politics by incorporating rare materials into digital collages. One student's piece here creatively explored themes of lesbian and queer invisibility by “remixing” illustrations of paired feminine figures throughout time with the research "We Are Lesbians" from 1970 publication Lavender Vision, held by the University of Pittsburgh Library System.

Amplifying Student Voices

I always wanted to develop a digital and multimedia exhibit as an alternative way of communicating my research, and with this technology and the orientation of Megan and Justin I was able to do it.

(Maria Cecilia Llorens, PhD student curator of “Borges and Gomez de la Serna in Buenos Aires: Avant Garde Explorations about Literature and Tradition (1921-1951)"

(Above) Photograph of “Remixing the Archive: Students use Archives & Special Collections @ Pitt to Create Visual Arguments,” curated by David Mash (Pitt undergraduate student in Computer Science and Music) on behalf of Dr. Jessica FitzPatrick’s Projects in Digital Composition course.

In this exhibit, students used archives of Pittsburgh Library System & other local archives to express their thoughts on gender roles, pollution, and politics by incorporating rare materials into digital collages. One student's piece here creatively explored themes of lesbian and queer invisibility by “remixing” illustrations of paired feminine figures throughout time with the research "We Are Lesbians" from 1970 publication Lavender Vision, held by the University of Pittsburgh Library System.

Evolving Our Practices

I have learned that collaborating with students on digital interactive exhibits increases overall student exposure to archival and rare materials, prompting a rise in research visits by students, faculty, staff, and community members. Other students see their peers’ work and become interested in using primary sources in their own projects or assignments. The connections made by students in these exhibits has inspired faculty to dedicate class sessions to visiting the gallery. I have also seen a growing interest in incorporating curation alongside primary source research skill building during instruction sessions.

Future Goals

- Increase access to a wider range of students.
- Co-develop Digital Interactive Wall exhibit assignments with faculty.
- Explore methods of student exhibit documentation, including LibGuides and our institutional O-Scholarship repository.
- Develop general assessment tools for exhibits and self-assessment tools for student curators.

References and Resources

*Rare Collections Explorer, Hillman Library at University of Pittsburgh* ([Accessed February 2023](https://www.pslibrary.umd.edu/projects/rarecollectionsexplorer)).


Acknowledgements and Contact

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