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More than just art on the walls: Enhancing Fine Arts Pedagogy in the Academic Library Space

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Introduction:

Much attention has been paid in the academy to creating active learning environments both within the classroom and outside of it. This focus on experiential and problem-based learning has become widely adopted or at least attempted by many in a relatively short period of time. While active learning in the fine arts has long been part of curricula (i.e. studio art, sculpture, etc.), little attention has been paid to creating a “complete picture” of the fine arts industry, specifically exposing the students to the juried selection, finishing and purchasing processes. Many times, collegiate artists leave their institutions with degrees but have never sold a piece of art nor really know how even to approach this process.

Similarly, academic libraries’ spaces have become more collaborative in recent years, reflecting ever changing curricula. However, with new technologies and collaboration areas, outreach and space design for scientific, social science and professional disciplines sometimes overshadow what the library could do for fine arts, specifically as exhibition space as well as curricular space.

This chapter outlines one initiative to include fine arts in the academic library space, through a library-led and faculty-advised juried selection and purchasing process for fine arts students. The annual Student Art Purchase Award at Valparaiso University, not only enhances fine arts students’ business acumen through experiential learning, it also increases the versatility of the library as multidisciplinary learning space.

Experiential Learning as Pedagogy

While art in the library is not a new concept, experiential learning in the form of independent undergraduate research is, comparatively. As a pedagogy, undergraduate experiential learning has gained much momentum in recent decades across the academy, but until recently has largely been absent from the library (Kremer & Bringle 1990; Chandra, Stoecklin & Harmon 1998; Russell, Hancock, & McCullough 2007). Previously, librarians mostly concentrated instruction efforts on course-related research with little differentiation between undergraduate research and traditional curriculum-based research (Stamatoplos 2009, p. 239). In fact, because these undergraduate researchers do not adhere to a traditional curriculum, ‘they can fail to recognize the potential value of interaction with librarians’ (p. 239). Even if librarians have started outreach to independent undergraduate researchers since 2009, little has been done to examine the library as an experiential learning space, particularly for fine arts pedagogy.

Library as Fine Arts Pedagogical Space

Student fine arts pedagogy and student artwork in the libraries, especially academic libraries, has also become commonplace in recent years, but with only sporadic emphasis on creating experiential learning – a mixing of both pedagogy and practice – for fine arts students. In one instance, visual arts students used scientific materials for inspiration to create artwork for one college’s science library, creating a rare instance of art-science collaboration within a library setting, helping visual arts students study scientific material for practice purposes (Merolli 2009).

For example, citing Dana’s (1913) influence on artwork in the library, librarians at Rutgers University set up a multifaceted arts program, rotating a permanent collection of professional works of art and other fine arts pedagogical exhibits (Mullins & Watkins, 2008). They argue that this type of program reinforces Dana’s vision of a ‘vital intellectual and cultural center’ for students and other library patrons and that this scheduled shifting of professional artwork ‘overcomes any language, cultural or economic barrier to provide the students an

opportunity to interact with the art and learn about themselves,' though the authors say little about the inclusion or exclusion of student artwork in their program (p. 86; p. 84).

The library juried exhibition has become the most common instance of mixing pedagogy and practice within the library for fine arts students, though few libraries have documented their processes. UT Knoxville librarians started a competition specifically as a 'venue for the students, as opposed to staff or artists in the community,' selected by library personnel (Beals 2007, p. 56). The competition was open to all enrolled UT Knoxville students, but was designed as only a temporary exhibit. While this public display of student artwork is an established practice, the students received 'practice in a juried submission process' in addition to receiving 'greater exposure for their artwork' (p. 58). Another example of using a juried submission process is an annual student art competition as a result of a partnership with the Art Department and Reed Library at Fort Lewis College. The jury consisted of library personnel, while the art faculty members advised the students and the process (Oliver 2012). This 'remarkably easy' collaboration between art and library personnel resulted in students gaining 'experience in the proposal writing and competition' yet did not result in a permanent sale of the work (p. 94).

Case Study: The Student Art Purchase Award

The Christopher Center for Library and Information Resources (CCLIR) is a four-story building at Valparaiso University, housing primarily Christopher Center Library Services (CCLS), including University Archives and Special Collections as well as four other departments: It is a popular space on campus, with an average yearly gate count of over 370,000. The building is a good example of catering to students' needs: providing natural light, and evolving study spaces and furniture. However, it is lacking in original art. Outside of occasional CCLS and University Archives and Special Collections displays, the walls in the CCLIR are either blank or house framed low-cost art prints.

With the desire for original art, the library could have reached out to Valparaiso University's Department of Art to obtain faculty work or to the campus art museum, but it was important to library faculty to involve undergraduate students, as Valparaiso University is primarily a teaching university. But how does an academic library go about seeking art from current undergraduate students who are taking various types of art classes? Without a stable infrastructure for collection, would this collection be piecemeal and dependent on the students themselves? How could this be maintained beyond a one-time art procurement, perhaps deepening a connection with both the students and the Department of Art? Library faculty decided to cement the process of acquiring student art by creating the Student Art Purchase Award.

An initial meeting in fall 2013 with the chair of the Department of Art to discuss a possible annual award determined the high level of interest from both departments and established a timeline, requirements and pedagogy. The goal was to emulate a professional experience for these art students along with enriching the Library facility. Both parties decided that an art award open to art majors and minors would be mutually beneficial. Applicants would present their artwork to a library selection committee; the presentation would detail the art itself and the plan and cost of the framing of the art, if selected. CCLS would provide funding to purchase the art, the committee of faculty and staff, permanent art placement/storage of the art, an opening reception for the artists and an online gallery to display digital images of the art via the ContentDM platform (<http://collections.valpo.edu/cdm/landingpage/collection/studentwork>). The Department of Art would put out the call for submissions, manage the applicants by counseling them on art pricing, finishing and how to professionally present art and would supply electronic copies of all art to the library committee. CCLS would hold the copyright to the artwork. The Dean of Library Services agreed to one thousand dollars of annual funding, equal to another Library Research

Award. Rather than using the funds to select only one art piece, the committee could purchase multiple pieces, as long as the budget was not exceeded.

Having received administrative approval, an entry process was created to mirror the practices of most juried art exhibits, with an expectation that students would learn this set of procedures, making them familiar and experienced with the professional entry process (see URL). In the typical professional juried application process, it is rare that an artist gets to present their work in a public presentation, as would happen in a client/artist relationship. The Department of Art and CCLS faculty felt it was in the students' best interest to make the presentation process a requirement. These few adjustments in professional practices were created to better suit the pedagogical mission of both departments as well as that of Valparaiso University.

A major component of this presentation hinged on revealing a budget for potentially purchased works. The student established the value of the actual piece of art along with the specific costs for framing, mounting and/or professionally finishing each individual piece. The details of anticipated finishing materials were expected in every presentation. Requiring this logistical budgeting component forced students to think about art creation in a way that was not being addressed in the classroom. Other elements of these presentations dealt with addressing dimensions, materials, and explanation of content. These presentations were designed as an attempt to sell artwork to a potential buyer, CCLS. Although the Department of Art has in place other venues to address each student's development as an artist, this event was created to expose participating students to a more commercial application of producing artwork.

The selection committee looked at various policies of other academic libraries and museums and crafted a student art collection policy that would emphasize collecting student artwork that exemplifies the student experience at Valpo. This policy was deliberately broad so

as to include many diverse works. In the second year of the award, the committee added a requirement for the students to address this in their presentations.

Adding artwork to Valparaiso University buildings requires the approval of the University Space Planning Committee (USPC). For the first year, award winners' art pieces are displayed in the second floor fireplace lounge: a high traffic area on the main floor of the library. Initial permission for the lounge was granted by USPC on the basis of an email request, but the permanent placement of the art pieces required further consideration. The Department of Art chair assessed the CCLIR facility in regards to the long-term placement of the art pieces, considering the amount of space needed to keep the yearly collections together, the lighting of the areas selected and how the space would fit the art and vice versa. After relaying this information to the USPC, the committee did not grant the library carte blanche for the project as it continues, but their continual permission is granted once a year with updated information.

Long-term storage of the art pieces was something that had to be considered by CCLS when implementing the award. While the chair of the Department of Art's building assessment determined that the CCLIR has enough blank or replaceable wall space to house between 15 and 20 years of the art award, long-term success of the award would require storage planning. The CCLIR has an automatic storage and retrieval system (ASRS) onsite –with environmental protections– which is used to store books not currently in the stacks and other archival material. With storage bins that measure, 8 square feet, the majority of art pieces would easily fit and would be stored with archival supplies to avoid damage.

Benefits of the Award from an Art Faculty Member's Perspective

The benefits to art students from the perspective of art curriculum are numerous. Every art major learned about the entry process by observing their peers even if they chose not to participate. These student observations support growth simply by creating an awareness of

professional protocol. The selected students are held to the highest standards when it comes to finishing their art works. They are forced to acquire all of their finishing materials as well as the actual framing and matting of each piece. The quality of this framing was equal to that of any professional framer; experience in finishing skills will prove to be beneficial in the long term for each student.

The art majors and minors applying for the award attended every presentation and had the opportunity to learn from their peers. The goal was to foster critical thinking about how each student can more clearly talk about their work. Refining confidence and establishing clarity in a presentation about any creative work is an important component in understanding what drives any artist to make the work in the first place. University Student Learning Outcomes (SLO's) are specifically addressed in this process for every participating student (see URL) Students whose art works were not accepted into the collection were notified and then had the opportunity to meet with the Art Department chair to discuss and learn what improvements should be made in presenting their work and selecting works for future opportunities.

Ultimately this collection will serve as an important component in professional development for every one of these young artists. Students gain valuable experience concerning the application process, production and presentation of their own art works. Additionally, students can link to the online gallery as part of their CV/portfolios. The university community benefits as well; the CCLIR is a highly used facility that draws the widest variety of faculty, staff and student interaction, including members of the surrounding community, inviting a wide audience to comment on their work, which might never have a chance for a sizable audience if housed in a traditional art gallery.

Benefits of the Award from a Library Faculty Member's Perspective

This award has resulted in art students having a greater awareness of what the library can do for them, as fine arts students do not often use the library for research related to their creative work. The entire juried and purchasing process echoes the Association for College and Research Libraries (ACRL) threshold concept of Information Has Value: ‘Information possesses several dimensions of value, including as a commodity, as a means of education, as a means to influence, and as a means of negotiating and understanding the world’ (ACRL, 2015). In this case, students’ art is their information, and the library shows that information’s value by exhibiting it on the walls of the CCLIR. It also brings to the students’ focus that their work can in fact be a commodity and an influence; the finishing and invoicing process brings this from abstract to practical.

The student work is seen by much of the campus population as well as the external community. Having their artwork permanently displayed also gives the artist a lifelong connection to the building, institution, and local community. The celebration of student artwork during the reception brings attention to the collection and offers an equivalent celebration for these fine artists to the end-of-the-year research event associated with experiential learning in other disciplines, such as a research symposium or design expo. The student art in the CCLIR also shows, in a physical way, that the library is interested in students and their creative work, even to students outside the Department of Art.

Valparaiso University’s role as a teaching institution is reflected in the library’s relationship to and reputation among students. As Kam (2001) states, ‘By collecting art objects, we exercise our role as key cultural players in society while also reinforcing out institutional identities’ (p. 14). An art piece in the library is viewed differently, in its intended purpose, than it would be viewed in the student union or in the university Chapel. Art pieces are viewed not only by the award winners and art students, or indeed any student, but are also seen by faculty,

administration, future students and community members. Each observer sees this visual representation as one way the library affects student lives.

Benefits of the Award from an Art Student's Perspective

The students who participated in the award process were asked about their experiences in an anonymous survey. The responses showed that the award is beneficial, including positive comments about the framing, selling, and finishing of the pieces. When the students were asked about their views on the CCLIR and if they had changed after their art award experience, the consensus was that their views had changed for the better, with one saying they have “a deeper relationship” with the library, while another commented on the library’s “pursuit of quality” and “diversifying the education experience” not offered elsewhere on campus.

Students were also asked if they felt that this award was a real collaboration between the library and the art department to make the library a more beautiful place. The responses were unanimously positive, with one student elaborating that ‘*more departments should follow the example and work” with the art department and the library.*’ The Valparaiso University student newspaper, *The Torch*, echoed this in its story covering the first year’s reception: ‘This new award has proven to be an exciting opportunity for aspiring artists and good for the library and the community to show their support for what these students do’ (Crapitto, n.p.).

Figure 27.1: Student surveys the first group of Library Student Art Purchase Award winning artwork at the 2014 Student Artist Reception; copyright © 2014 Valparaiso University

Future Plans

Currently, the award is limited to two-dimensional art, due to available display and storage space. The challenge of obtaining and displaying three-dimensional or digital art on site will be continually evaluated by both CCLS and the Department of Art. The latter department does offer several courses that give students experience in creating three-dimensional works

which are not currently considered for selection. A commitment to display electronic media needs to be addressed as well as obtaining the proper equipment necessary to showcase such work. These limitations will need to be addressed and resolved in an effort to better accommodate all art majors. There may also be a need to have a rotating schedule for artwork; as wall space becomes limited and art pieces go into storage in the ASRS, CCLS will need to develop a policy for the rotation of the art.

Conclusion

While this project has challenging aspects, and the funding challenge may be prohibitive to many libraries, the overall experience is beneficial for all stakeholders. The Department of Art and its students equally benefit from the experiential learning that was not previously covered within the curriculum. CCLS is able to support a group of students in a new and unique way, and obtains original art for its walls. It also ‘invite[s] attention, inquiry, study,’ as Dana articulated, for all library patrons. All who view the art in the CCLIR are made aware that the library and the Department of Art hold student work in high esteem. This partnership can be modelled in any academic library that has display space, a source of some funding, art majors and minors and the willingness to collaborate between departments.

The Student Art Purchase Award allows CCLS to show that its interest in pedagogy goes beyond a more narrow view of information literacy to the new, broader threshold concepts. Academic libraries are about all forms of information, including creative expressions. After four successful years, the Student Art Purchase Award is already a permanent fixture for art major and minors and CCLS continues in its role as client and an intrinsic part of a collaborative pedagogy.

Within a traditional classroom setting, students may be taught the process of developing a client/artist relationship, finishing a piece of art, presenting in a juried environment and

creating invoices and bills. They may even observe their fine arts instructors go through the process themselves. But unless students experience it for themselves, outside of class, interacting with real clients, this knowledge remains theoretical. An approach like the Student Art Purchase Award is experiential learning that has positive implications for the art students' professional readiness.

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