The Library in the Classroom

By Craig Fansler

As a librarian at the Z. Smith Reynolds Library at Wake Forest University, I look for opportunities to collaborate with faculty to develop innovative approaches to teaching. I also strive to get our students to utilize our library resources and facilities. For a number of years, I’ve collaborated with several Wake Forest faculty to help students exhibit design and installation in the library exhibit spaces. Until these exhibits began, library exhibits were designed by library staff. With this innovation, the students have a stake in the result and in the library. The exhibit design process involves meeting with each class, and each student in each class. Pre-design meetings with students emphasize best practices, utilizing library resources and fabrication. The idea of doing an exhibit in lieu of a 10-page paper is novel—as is the individual exhibits that result. Students tend to become more involved personally in these projects and retain more of the knowledge gained as a result. As the librarian responsible for exhibits, I am always astounded at the innovative ways students employ to tell their story.

The star linebacker is standing beside the glass door of the case and talking about his exhibit from his class on the history of Rome. He gets snickers from his classmates as he compares the quarterback on a football team to a certain type of Roman gladiator that he describes as “soft” inside or outside quote? The class gathered by eight exhibit cases at the library entrance make a larger than normal crowd as other students quickly hustle by looking for a class, a coffee or a friend. This is presentation day for the students in this history class. They have been at work for months on each of their exhibits and now are presenting their work to the rest of the class. This project
was fun and engaging for the students, the professor and the librarian involved. Using a project-based approach, we were able to engage students in the material while teaching them about library resources.

The Library and the Classroom Merge

For the past ten years, a history professor and a librarian at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, have collaborated with each other and their students to create library exhibit projects. Dr. Jeffrey Lerner, Professor of History, and Craig Fansler, Preservation Librarian, have worked together to blend the classroom and the library in a way that adds dimension to traditional classroom activities. The exhibits are designed by undergraduate students with direction from the professor and librarian. The class sizes range from 8–20 students who spend preliminary time determining a topic, doing research and, finally, designing their exhibit.

Beginning in 1998, Dr. Jeffrey Lerner and I began discussing a way to incorporate an exhibit project into his history classes at Wake Forest University. Dr. Lerner and I were already casual friends, often having informal discussions as we met in the library or on campus. This idea, however, involved a formal relationship and working with a group of students which we both would direct. My position in the library included exhibit design, and I had work experience in exhibits in a prior job, so this was a natural connection.

Each year I begin by creating a helpful worksheet for designing an exhibit; I distribute this worksheet to each student. The worksheet includes design tips, dos and don’ts, key elements in a good exhibit and some photographic examples of good exhibits. Early in the semester, I visit the classroom and describe the exhibit project to the class. During this visit, a brief discussion is held about the project and what the students can expect in terms of materials needed and assistance from their friendly neighborhood librarian. The class is divided into groups of two or three students, who work together to design and install their exhibit project. I show the class examples of headings, text panels, photographs and creative focal points from past exhibits created by students. I also demonstrate easy methods of enlarging images using an overhead projector, copier or printer. An area on the floor of my lab, taped off in the exact dimensions of the display cases, is used for pre-installation layout.

After this initial meeting, each student group meets with their professor to determine a viable topic for their exhibit. Each student then meets with me to draft a rough exhibit concept and layout. During this session, the student discusses his or her ideas and, together, we pencil in the key elements that we both agree will make their exhibit successful. This is a brainstorming session when students state their ideas, and together, we try to make these ideas a reality.

The Real Work Begins

Each student group then takes their design concept and begins the process of creating a title, writing the text and labels, identifying library resource materials, locating images and creating an exhibit focal point.
Library Worklife

exhibit focal point can be anything from a Mayan calendar wheel to an Etruscan tomb. This key element is the lure to draw a viewer into the exhibit and arouse their interest. Working independently and in my office space, the elements of each student’s exhibit slowly emerges. One student creates a three foot long heading panel; another mounts a photo of Trajan’s Column on foam core; yet another traces the outline of an ancient Roman frieze. These individual elements can be checked for size by using the taped off floor layout area. This group work takes several weeks to complete as each group works on their projects in one or two hour segments. We’ve noticed that many students procrastinate and will sometimes leave this exhibit work until the end of the semester. To combat this tendency, we have developed a time line with key deadlines for accomplishing work on each exhibit.

Installation

Installation begins when all the exhibit elements are trimmed and mounted. The previous exhibit is removed, the glass is cleaned and the inside of the case is dusted. Rolls of colored paper are used to cover the background of each exhibit case. When the background paper is stapled in place, artifacts, photographs, text, labels and books are added. Sometimes, one or two students fold themselves awkwardly in an exhibit case as they struggle to get all the exhibit parts in the right place. Soon, the exhibit is completely installed and the case door is locked.

On the last class meeting of each semester, the entire class assembles by the library exhibit cases. Each student in the class who created an exhibit then gives a short oral summary to their classmates about their exhibit, which is followed by questions. To document each exhibit, I take photographs for our library Exhibit blog (http://blog.zsr.wfu.edu/exhibits/) and our Flickr site (http://www.flickr.com/photos/zsrlibrary/). These student exhibits remain in place for several months, allowing time for the campus to see the projects. The photographs on the Library Exhibit blog and our Flickr site are not deleted. This digital presence connects the student work to the rest of the world and to the library community at large. Many libraries use blogs and the photo-sharing site, Flickr.com, to promote their activities. This documentation of student exhibit projects invites a wider audience for viewing these exhibits into the future.

The Benefits

An exhibit is not a terribly difficult project to complete, but the process of encapsulating a 10-page paper topic in a 3-dimensional form can be a challenge. This project often allows students who may not excel at writing a paper the opportunity to demonstrate other, equally valid, abilities. These students often retain much of the information they learn designing each exhibit because each student must summarize their information into a succinct display.

Many libraries across the country are struggling to get patrons in their library. This exhibit project gets our students inside the library and using our library materials in tangible and visible way that gets the attention of the entire university community. The students and our library benefit from this collaborative project. The initial project has now grown to include Humanities, Religion and Information Literacy courses. An embedded librarian in a classroom is a productive and stimulating solution for students in the creative learning environment of a university library. In the process of creating exhibits, our library becomes a familiar place to our students and makes them feel comfortable working in this environment with more frequency.

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