Transformational Change:
Visual Resources Curators, Collections, and Users in a New Era

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In 1998 I assumed responsibility for a large and heavily used academic collection of slides and videotapes, along with a few projectors and AV carts. In the last decade I have overseen and witnessed a nearly complete transition from analog to digital images within my department, which has radically altered and expanded the role of my facility. I use both the words “overseen” and “witnessed” here, because while I was painstakingly navigating our campus bureaucracy to establish a scalable digital infrastructure, my faculty and student patrons were independently forging ahead with digital images, often without much forethought or expertise.
Our once bustling facility experienced a dramatic drop in visitors in the space of just a couple of years. Having established models, workflows, and staffing for our digital collection and all of the new duties related to imaging resources and training, my focus now is to entice more users back to our facility by illustrating that we offer both expertise and a willingness to communicate and partner with them to provide the services they need. I have come to understand the importance of creating and marketing new collaborative relationships with my faculty and students, and that in fact, the very survival of our facility depends on it. My talk concerns methods that those of us in academic visual resources are pursuing to accomplish this. I agreed to speak here not because I consider myself an expert on liaising, but because it is a topic that I care about and think about often. I want to acknowledge that I have been informed and inspired by many successful models among my colleagues in the Visual Resources Association, especially through events at the last two annual conferences. Many of the examples I will share today were discussed at these presentations.¹

The literature about liaison librarianship reflects an evolution from an earlier focus on collection development to a more broad and dynamic range of activities. In addition to bibliographer, the liaison role now more often encompasses concepts such as consulting, collaboration, information literacy, research, outreach, marketing, and public relations. In their 2001 article in the *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, Frank, Raschke, Wood, and Yang describe the model of “information consulting” as key to the viability of academic libraries. Here consulting is not seen as a one-way flow of information from consultant to client, but encompasses the idea of partnership and expertise sharing. In their model the information consultant “takes the initiative to develop active partnership with scholars, conferring and deliberating on important instructional and research issues. Consultants anticipate and assess information needs, delivering value added information and services in a timely way.” The authors argue that if librarians do not “customize, filter, synthesize, and market information for students, scholars, and administrators,” these individuals will seek their information elsewhere. This also applies to users of visual information. We all recognize that digital resources have changed the information seeking-behavior of image users. The path of least resistance is frequently offered by external sources, such as Google images, and by personal scanners and digital cameras. Convenience and immediacy have generally made faculty and students less tolerant of previously acceptable wait times. The de-emphasis on the physical space traditionally occupied by a centralized slide collection has also slowed foot traffic in academic VR facilities. Despite the theoretical desire for high quality images, the flexibility and ease of working within a preferred schedule in the home or office often takes precedence over acquiring a better quality image through a visual resources intermediary. Visual resources professionals are finding innovative ways to address changing needs through the interrelated activities of liaison work, outreach, and marketing. In a recent article, Lara Ursin Cummings differentiates between these three concepts, which I will discuss in the following order in the context of visual resources. She treats the liaison role like that of the information consultant, with an emphasis on mutual understanding and cooperation through communication. Outreach activities occur outside the physical space normally occupied by the information professional. Marketing is a way to promote services based on user interest and communication methods.

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4 Frank and others, “Information Consulting,” 92.

5 Ibid., 92.

6 Ibid., 95.


8 Ibid.
The cornerstone of the “liaison as visual information consultant” model is expertise. It is crucial that visual resources professionals possess the knowledge required to provide services and guidance to patrons, but also that patrons perceive us as experts and thus colleagues with whom they wish to collaborate. While most faculty members do not expect us to share their level of scholarly knowledge, many do need to be shown that image professionals possess specialized knowledge about tools and resources for effectively accessing and delivering images.
Keeping up with new technologies, resources, and standards is vital. Attending conferences, monitoring listservs, and reading professional journals are all familiar means of staying current within the field. Subscribing to blogs and other dynamic Web sites is also a great way to keep apprised of news from selected sources. Google Reader and Bloglines are just two examples of free content feed services that enable the user to aggregate content from selected multiple sources into one easily accessible and manageable location.

This is a screenshot of my Google Reader account, with unread content visible in bold. Devoting some time each day to review new developments from our fields and from related fields, such as educational technology and museums, helps us acquire and share expert knowledge with confidence.
My colleague and I maintain a blog on image related technology and resources for our department. We have received positive feedback about it from a number of department members, including a few who had not previously acknowledged that our facility could provide them with any useful information. These kinds of activities serve our patrons, and also help convince them that we possess valuable expertise that can make their jobs easier.

Of course, subject knowledge is important. Familiarity with the local curriculum helps academic VR professionals understand the image needs of faculty and students. Copies of course syllabi and required textbooks are effective tools in building useful image collections when your patrons are not in the habit of requesting your image collection development services. In acts of what I like to call “shameless liaisons,” our facility purchases and digitizes images from textbooks and other sources, or from 35mm slides returned by patrons when used in a last minute pinch. Student employees enrolled in department courses can also be helpful in identifying images appropriate for our collection. Faculty members are often pleasantly surprised to learn that we have added images to support their courses, and this can prompt them to request related content. Enhancing my subject knowledge by auditing classes is something I confess I’ve not found time for in some years, but I’ll do when possible because it also helps me build relationships with both faculty and student patrons.
These types of activities help define us as members of our academic community. Sitting on committees and attending meetings, lectures, show openings, and other gatherings are effective ways to maintain awareness of departmental politics, scholarship, and creative work; to make our existence known; and to illustrate that we are part of the group.\textsuperscript{10} I am a member of the department’s technology committee, which provides me with leadership and input opportunities where technology is concerned, and has helped with funding and staffing in our facility.

We discovered by happy accident that attending events with cameras not only promotes positive relationships with others in the department, but also helps to associate us with images.
It also is increasingly important that we liaise “more broadly,” as Candace Dahl recently wrote, with administrators and other colleagues across campus. It is our responsibility to educate administrators about the value of what we do and how we can contribute to evolving models for providing content and support to new and existing users. We can provide liaison services in teams with other entities to more fully integrate academic, library, information technology, marketing, and administrative resources. In doing so we leverage more knowledge, and further position ourselves as experts on campus. My facility has partnered with the library, other academic units, and the information technology department to provide training sessions for resources like ARTstor, and to prepare information and promotional tools for our digital library. Working with colleagues across our campus encourages ongoing collaborative relationships, enables a mutual understanding of roles and services, and helps establish our identity outside of our own department.


Closely related to liaising, outreach is about the now familiar tenet of “going to where the users are.” This is accomplished outside our facilities, through activities in the physical spaces occupied by our patrons and through a digital presence in the online environments they already inhabit. With different generational needs and learning styles, a range of outreach methods must be employed to reach everyone, from Millennials to senior faculty members.

Proactive contact with new faculty members can be a great way to make them aware of visual resources, and is often a much-appreciated gesture. Prior to the start of each semester, I reach out new faculty members via e-mail to welcome them and inform them of our services. I am frequently the first person from our department to contact them. Some liaison librarians take new faculty members to lunch; Karen Bouchard and Norine Duncan report that this practice has been very successful at the Art Slide Library at Brown University. Appearing at new faculty orientations and faculty meetings is also an effective means of keeping a high profile while sharing information about our services.

This kind of outreach is also productive with students. Every year I participate in our graduate and undergraduate orientations, and I make sure to provide advisors with up to date materials about our facility. It is helpful to maintain a file containing current PR text and materials that can be shared with others for various purposes, such as campus tours, promotional materials, and fundraising literature. I now supply faculty members with information they can cut and paste into their syllabi each semester, and regularly remind them that we are happy to conduct orientations for their classes. While on-site orientations are ideal for encouraging return visits, I have discovered that many faculty members prefer that I come to the classroom.
For these occasions I have created a “virtual orientation” presentation in PowerPoint, which attempts to visually replicate the experience of an on-site orientation. Another intriguing outreach method at Brown is a “Librarian’s Corner” feature in many of the art history faculty’s course management system pages, with links to librarian profiles and information about finding images, searching databases, and invitations to consult librarians for assistance. It is important not to underestimate the role that student patrons can play in promoting our services by simply using them. For instance, they can be early adopters of new technologies and resources, and instructors sometimes follow their lead, even if many faculty members would prefer not to admit this. I was pleasantly surprised to see this happen in our department with the adoption of ARTstor, for example.

Outreach through training and instruction can occur in traditional ways, such as one-on-one and group sessions like those we offer in my facility on finding, digitizing, archiving, and presenting images. I am inspired by Betha Whitlow’s example of expanding instructional support in the Visual Resources Collection of the Department of Art History and Archaeology at Washington University. She has broadened her offerings to include emerging Web 2.0 technologies such as RSS feeds, Flickr, and Google Docs. This began by sharing an “Introduction to Web 2.0” presentation with arts faculty as a way to give them a better understanding of the culture students exist in, and has since expanded to workshops for many different groups at the university level.
The Visual Resources Collection in the School of Architecture at UT Austin capitalizes on new possibilities offered by Web 2.0 technologies in their outreach and training activities under the direction of Elizabeth Schaub. They have produced and posted on YouTube a series of short yet very informative and sophisticated Now You Know videos on a range of topics such as PowerPoint tips, slide scanning, Web resources, and digital images.¹³

¹³ http://www.youtube.com/user/SOAVRC.
They have also created a Flickr group for members of their college to share images and help build an online community.¹⁴

¹⁴ http://www.flickr.com/groups/utsoa/.
a strategy which I have recently been inspired to try. Betha, Elizabeth, and others will be discussing the potential of emerging technologies at tomorrow’s “Integrating Resources through Collaborative Convergence” session.

http://www.flickr.com/groups/aahvrc/
Marketing strategies complement consulting and outreach by making these services better known to patrons. Libraries and visual resources units alike are beginning to understand the importance of public relations and marketing. As several authors have noted, libraries were once reluctant to embrace these ideas, due in part to their “captive audience.”

Until recently, slide users frequented visual resources facilities with little need for encouragement. Decentralized electronic resources now require that we actively promote our services to faculty, students, administrators, and other colleagues across campus. We must illustrate that we offer the knowledge and resources to help users access, create, and use higher quality image content with greater efficiency. This can include a formal marketing plan, as was created by Elizabeth Schaub’s facility at UT Austin, or something more like my experimental, ad hoc approach. Either way, we all need to be creative about letting our patrons know what we do and how we can help.

Cultivating a welcoming environment and reputation in whatever way works best for a facility is important for attracting students especially, who are often reluctant to walk in the door or ask for help due to “library anxiety.” While our style won’t work for everyone, we have the latitude to incorporate some elements in our space that suggest to our patrons that we are approachable humans with a sense of humor and fun.
In the last year we have held several well-attended open houses with free coffee, tea, and cookies, which have been tremendously successful ways to lure students in the door.
Most of them visit initially for the coffee, but it is gratifying to see so many of them become excited about the services we provide once they have entered our facility. These students tend to return often, and feel comfortable asking questions where they might not have before.
I have begun to share a periodic “What’s new in our collection” e-mail update with faculty members and students in our department. Two facilities that expand on this idea in innovative ways are the Art Slide Library at Brown, which features eye-catching image exhibitions mounted on site,
and the Visual Resources Collection in the School of Architecture at UT Austin, which hosts regular online image exhibitions.\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{17}http://soa.utexas.edu/vrc/exhibits.
Many visual resources facilities have begun to use branding as a way to promote their identity. Logos and slogans can help present a consistent image across communication venues. We have recently created a logo and slogan we are using on posters and in other environments. Posters, brochures, and fliers can be effective ways to promote services.
The examples we see here are from Washington University and Brown, who were able to take advantage of the skills of staff members or students with backgrounds in graphic design.
Elizabeth Schaub has created a beautiful resources card for all of the facilities and services in her school, which is included in orientation materials.
A presence in various online environments is important today. We should all take the time to provide useful Web pages, as most people expect to find information about our resources and services on the Internet. Participation in Web 2.0 environments promotes our existence, informs our users, and illustrates to patrons and administrators that our facilities are engaged with new technologies.
Those with time to devote to blogs and wikis can illustrate their expertise while sharing valuable information. Here we see some blog examples from the Massachusetts College of Art and Design’s Visual Resources Library\(^\text{18}\); the Otis College of Art and Design’s Visual Resources Center\(^\text{19}\); and the School of Architecture at UT Austin’s Visual Resources Collection.\(^\text{20}\)

\(^\text{18}\) http://visualresourcefulness.wordpress.com/.
\(^\text{19}\) https://blogs.otis.edu/vrclib/.
\(^\text{20}\) http://soa.utexas.edu/vrc/blog/.
Here are a few more examples, from the VRC of the Department of Art History at the University of Chicago;\(^{21}\) the Digital Collections and Archives for the College of Design at the University of Minnesota;\(^{22}\) and the VRC in the Art, Architecture, and Engineering Library at the University of Michigan.\(^{23}\) I am currently recruiting guest bloggers among our faculty members and graduate students who are engaged with new technologies in their teaching. Several have already agreed to write short entries about their experiences with class blogs, wikis, and student Wikipedia entries. I hope that this platform for information sharing will also lead to more regular readers.

\(^{21}\) http://lucian.uchicago.edu/blogs/vrc/.

\(^{22}\) http://blog.lib.umn.edu/cdesdca/cdesdca/.

\(^{23}\) http://mblog.lib.umich.edu/vrc/.
Collaborative information sharing online can be accomplished through wikis. A good example of this is Otis’ Technology Wiki, which is used by students, faculty, and staff as a place to discuss, learn about, and promote projects and best practices.²⁴

YouTube can also be a good place to share both instructional and promotional video materials. Many of you have already seen the DePauw Libraries Visual Resource Center’s video series that parodies the “I’m a PC; I’m a Mac” campaign, featuring the “Visual Resource Center” versus “Google Image search.”

25 http://www.youtube.com/user/DePauwBranchLib.
Otis maintains its own YouTube channel, with lectures, interviews, department profiles, and instructional resources.\textsuperscript{26}

\textsuperscript{26} http://www.youtube.com/user/OtisCollege.
Facebook pages or groups are another way to maintain a higher online profile. Here we see a Facebook page that Betha Whitlow created for her department at Washington University\(^{27}\), a group from Otis’ Millard Sheets Library,\(^{28}\) and one I created recently for my collection.\(^{29}\)

\(^{27}\)http://www.facebook.com/s.php?init=q&q=washington+university+art&ref=ts&sid=b4db05efe66688ce85793f6ef971fb0a#/pages/Saint-Louis-MO/Washington-University-Art-History-and-Archaeology/66145861137?sid=b4db05efe66688ce85793f6ef971fb0a&ref=search.

\(^{28}\)http://www.facebook.com/profile.php?sid=ae3a8a1debee74f3ba88ac1b1692c89&id=589875557&hiq=otis%2Ccollege%2Cof%2Cart%2Cand%2Cdesign&ref=search#/group.php?gid=15179355350

We also use the Facebook gifts application consisting of novelty gift items associated with our facility which users can send each other. While we did this mostly for fun, we’ve had students whom we don’t know visit us and mention that they had enjoyed receiving our Facebook gifts from friends.
More VR facilities are sharing links to resources through social bookmarking. Here is a screen shot of our VRC’s Delicious bookmarks, which we make publicly available through links on our blog and our Facebook page.\(^{31}\) And of course, I can’t neglect to mention Twitter. While I don’t “tweet” at this time, there are certainly many who use this tool as another means of keeping interested parties apprised of developments.

Overall, persistence is key to establishing and marketing our role as visual information consultants. There is no single answer, and there are only so many hours in a day - we all must decide what strategies work best for our particular set of circumstances. The services we provide should respond to what we learn through our ongoing liaison relationships. In the end, this should result in better services; the fact that most visual resources facilities also create content for their users helps facilitate consulting, outreach, and marketing. It’s about making life easier for our patrons by helping them find and make better use of resources so that they look good. And if they look good, we look good.

Thank you

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