More than a Pretty Picture: Integrating Art and Visual Literacy with the ACRL Framework

Loretta Esparza, Catherine Fonseca, and Mary Wegmann
Sonoma State University Library

The SSU Library Art Committee curates exhibits for the Library’s prominently located gallery. The Art Committee develops course-integrated visual and information literacy programming that aligns exhibits with the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy through handouts, LibGuides, and collaboration with disciplinary faculty on course-integrated instruction and programming. This programming incorporates the gallery and visual literacy into the library’s curriculum.

Background

Library Art Committee Members:
• Loretta Esparza, Instruction and Reference Librarian
• Catherine Fonseca, Outreach and Inclusion Librarian
• Tumer Moulad, Access Services Manager
• Darren Sargent, Stacks Manager
• Mary Wegmann, Collection Development Librarian

Mission Statement

The Sonoma State University Library Gallery program enriches the intellectual, educational, and cultural life of the Sonoma State community through exhibits by student and alumni artists, regional artists, traveling exhibitions, and selections from the University Library’s unique collections. Exhibits are intended to align with the SSU mission and curriculum and inspire discussion and debate beyond the gallery walls.

SSU Library Strategic Plan Goal 2019-2025

Engage with campus partners, academic programs, and the external community to curate exhibits and programs that align with and are integrated into the university curriculum.

Space

• Comprises of 1128 square foot gallery space, located at the Library’s main entry
• The gallery entrance features glass windows in a highly-trafficked student study area

Alchemia: A Spectrum of Creativity

In Spring 2019, the Art Committee partnered with local non-profit Alchemia, an organization that “nurture[s] the creative expression of individuals with disabilities as a vehicle for personal growth” to curate an exhibit featuring artwork from their participants.

Frame: Authority is Constructed and Contextual

Disposition: Question traditional notions of granting authority and recognize the value of diverse ideas and worldviews.

Programming: The exhibit reception featured a panel discussion, facilitated by Alchemia’s Artistic Director, with artists, Alchemia and SSU faculty on the label of “outsider art.” Questions addressed included: Does this label help to give authority to artists and their work? Does it help contextualize the work? Or, does it limit the artists by labeling them and boxing them into a category? Through such discussions, participants learned to interrogate notions of expertise and authority in artistic expression.

Reflections: After the Fire

In October 2017, the North Bay suffered devastating wildfires that resulted in significant loss and anxiety. In Fall 2018, one year after the fires, the Art Committee curated a group exhibition featuring 21 participants documenting and responding to the firestorm through painting, photography, video, and mixed media work.

Frame: Scholarship as a Conversation

Disposition: Value user-generated content and evaluate contributions made by others; recognize that scholarly conversations take place in various venues.

Programming: The exhibit reception included a panel featuring a popular local history writer with a selection of contributing artists. Attendees came from various counties, including those who had lost homes in the fire. The co-location of the work of many artists responding in different ways to the fires allowed viewers the opportunity to reflect on the events of October 2017 through various perspectives and interpretations. In addition, a research guide provided artist reflections and resources for research on California wildfires.

The Man and the Myth

The Spring 2020 exhibit examines the life and legacy of the celebrated American author, Jack London, as told through the rare artifacts housed in the SSU Library’s Special Collections.

Frame: Information Creation as a Process

Disposition: Monitor the value that is placed upon different types of information products in varying contexts.

Programming: A self-guided worksheet, adapted from The Getty Villa Self-Guided Visit activities, was available to gallery visitors and visiting classes. The worksheet asked visitors to select an object from the exhibit and make arguments as to why that object is simultaneously valuable and value-less. Gallery visitors were then prompted to name a personal belonging that could one day be found in a Special Collections or museum. By asking visitors to interrogate the changing value of an object based on its varying context in time and space, the self-paced worksheet encouraged visitors to think about the life cycle of primary sources as well as the role of Special Collections in acquiring and preserving the once-ordinary.

Querries: Queer Artists & Identity

In Fall 2019, the Art Committee curated a multimedia exhibit featuring five California-based queer artists and one San Francisco non-profit who explored queer identity, community, and history in their work. The exhibit commemorated the 50th Anniversary of the Stonewall Uprising and the following decades of LGBTQ+ liberation.

Frame: Research as Inquiry

Disposition: Consider research as open-ended exploration and engagement with information; value intellectual curiosity in developing questions and learning new investigative methods.

Programming: Our “Learning to Look” gallery handout, adapted from Visual Literacy for Libraries: A Practical Standards-Based Guide, asked visitors to jot down two questions that arose from carefully looking at a piece of artwork and think about where they might find the answers to those questions. By participating in this deep looking and questioning the viewer began to engage in developing lines of inquiry.

Artist Seth Eisen creates performances that embody queer histories he has uncovered through archival research and interviews. In creating his piece for SSU, Seth spoke with students, faculty, and librarians about queer identity on campus and conducted research in the SSU Special Collections. This research was reflected in the performance through new scenes and student-created zines.

Frame: Searching as Strategic Exploration

Disposition: Understand that first attempts at searching do not always produce adequate results.

Programming: The Art Committee developed a LGBTQ+: Research Guide that highlights search strategies for LGBTQ+ information sources and provides a list of LGBTQ+ related subject headings. In an information literacy session with a course on LGBTQ+ U.S. History, the librarians discussed the marginalization of queer materials due to censorship and classification systems that simplify, disguise, and de-normalize LGBTQ+ people. They discussed the challenges with collecting LGBTQ+ ephemera and primary source materials and strategies for locating these materials in online finding aids. Finally, the students—through a guided activity in which pairs looked closely at a single artifact from the SSU archives and examined its context—were asked to consider “Whose voice do you NOT hear represented in this item? Is that important to consider in your interpretation of the item?”

ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education

Authority is Constructed and Contextual

Information resources reflect their creators’ expertise and credibility, and are evaluated based on the information need and the context in which the information will be used. Authority is constructed in that various communities may recognize different types of authority. It is contextual in that the information need may help to determine the level of authority required.

Information Creation as a Process

Information is a process in which a message is conveyed and shared via a selected delivery method. The iterative processes of researching, creating, revising, and disseminating information vary, and the resulting product reflects these differences.

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. Legal and socioeconomic interests influence information production and dissemination.

Research as Inquiry

Research is iterative and depends upon asking increasingly complex or new questions whose answers may turn up in new directions or paths of inquiry in any field.

Scholarship as Conversation

Communities of scholars, researchers, or professionals engage in sustained discourse with new insights and discoveries occurring over time as a result of varied perspectives and interpretations.

Searching as Strategic Exploration

Searching for information is often nonlinear and iterative, requiring the evaluation of a range of information sources and the mental flexibility to pursue alternate avenues as new understanding develops.

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