

The surprise part of a librarian's life

Exhibition design and preparation course

by Andrew Dutka, Sherman Hayes, and Jerry Parnell

After we had completed our umpteenth exhibit this past year, Andy, Jerry, and Sherm were commiserating on the fact that we all had become (out of choice or necessity) accomplished exhibit designers and curators as part of our university library function at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington (UNCW).

Upon reflection, we noted that none of us had received formal training, theoretical preparation, or even practical workshop training on how to successfully produce an exhibit. Initially some of us were unhappy with having to spend time and energy on exhibits because it took away from other duties. However, in the fall of 1999, the Special Collections at Randall Library expanded, doubling its size and including a large public space with display cases and walls suitable for displays. With the capacity increased, we were in the business by choice and opportunity. We assumed that in libraries it was mainly the few, large and prestigious that had the time, energy, and resources to do displays.

Au contraire, the following examples demonstrate how we are creating exhibits and doing it regularly. Even our informal conversations with colleagues at public libraries, community colleges, small colleges, and

other mid-size universities indicate that scholarly and other types of display are becoming more useful as an outreach tool.

In the following article, we suggest that current and future library school curriculum should include a unit on exhibit design and preparation principles. We offer some practical suggestions based on our recent experiences. Librarians who find themselves as exhibit specialists (whether prepared or not) hopefully will learn some new insights or perhaps commiserate with our self-educational process.

Why are exhibits important to libraries?

1. Teaching tool. An exhibit is a wonderful opportunity for the library to organize materials around a theme and present that to its audiences as a self-learning experience. While a lecture may be part of the process, or guided tours and printed materials may supplement an exhibit, most exhibits are useful because individuals can interact with the material at their own pace, and this interaction meets the individual's needs in an unmonitored learning experience. With all the ways we learn, exhibits continue to be a powerful and popular format.

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2. Scholarly productivity. In addition to traditional forms of scholarly output, such as books and journal articles, we have accepted for our faculty exhibit creation as a legitimate form of scholarly output. Based on our informal survey of library tenure documents and anecdotal examples, it seems that other institutions are recognizing this scholarly effort.

There is no question that the standards for quality and comprehensiveness of such exhibits are not uniform. However, our experience shows that if approached correctly, the exhibit offers an opportunity for a library faculty member or team to create a scholarly product.

Exhibits call for our best thinking, research, writing, planning, organizing, and time. The exhibit may even have supplemental products, such as exhibition catalogs, teaching bibliographies, Web sites, traveling products, summary articles describing the exhibit, or a formal

curatorial lecture on the exhibited material. Most exhibits are time-based and not replicated for the professions like a publication. This should not minimize the potential professional growth offered by this type of scholarly endeavor.

3. Use of unique collections. Some collections, particularly materials in Special Collections and Archives, will seldom be seen or used unless they are physically presented.

4. Physical drawing card. Collections that are visual, oral, or tactile bring people into the facility. In order to teach and stimulate those who come into the facility and create new reasons to come in, we have created a coordinated exhibit strategy. We find that our interaction with potential and actual customers has changed over time. If an individual can get information via full-text searching for journals, he or she will no

longer automatically come into our physical facility. Exhibits are just one method of drawing new customers.

5. Technological outreach tool. We are in the process of creating a virtual tour of fine art held in the library. This is a blend of new programming and permanent exhibit design. Electronic Web exhibits may be temporary, promotional, or become permanent electronic resources. While there are unique issues in developing Web exhibits compared to physical in-house exhibits, there are more commonalities.

6. Creating a buzz. Although our core businesses generate the greatest volume of service and usage, many times it is the special exhibit that creates excitement. The exhibit may get coverage in a local newspaper, even though only a few hundred come to see it. The thousands of books added or hundreds of classes taught, while central to your mission, seldom generate the publicity, buzz, or recognition.

7. Partnerships.

The space that is available for exhibition can be a powerful tool for working with many different types of units on campus. Few departments have the materials, space, and staff that are available in the library. Recent exhibits produced in our spaces, led by library faculty, include alliances with History, Earth Sciences, English, Film Studies, and Theatre departments; Student Publications; Wellness Center; University Union; University Relations; and Museum of World Cultures.

In addition to library-designed exhibits, there may be opportunities to use your space for traveling exhibits, which involves less actual design by the library, but still involves planning, placement, and promotion. The partnerships help the library reach out to its patron base and develop ongoing relationships. The off-campus relationships may tie to existing collections, needed community



Replicating the feeling of a movie theater lobby, the main entrance to a film-themed exhibit invites the patron to explore. Physically altering an exhibit space helps create a mood and enhances the impact of the exhibit.

service, potential donors, or other cultural organizations. There may be potential problems meeting the needs of community members who are not used to working within an academic environment, including raising and using resources, decision making, content, and exhibit design. Donors may want their gift displayed in a certain way or during a time period that does not fit the needs of the university.

8. Donor recognition and development. Many unusual items, including manuscripts and collections, are given to an academic library. The donor hopes and expects their "special" gift to be recognized, appreciated, and used. One of the most effective ways to do this is to construct an exhibit honoring the content of the gift and the donors. The exhibit and supporting events may be part of a bigger development effort that helps identify and cultivate new donors.

Components of exhibit design

A. Quality expectation. The public expects, based on their experiences with other exhibits and commercial visual products, high-quality exhibits with professional visual impact and standards. The public makes no distinction between any of your products; all should be visually dynamic.

B. Who designs? The advent of the computer does not necessarily mean that we are all good graphic designers. We recommend that any librarian involved in displays understands the graphic packages available and visual products on the market. Although you may work with partners, the librarian should coordinate the design effort.

C. Key design elements. The exhibit has to have a hook that is tied to a theme or specific educational goal. First, one must choose the intellectual reason for the exhibit. What do you want your viewer to learn? Should the viewer be changed after participating in your exhibit (entertained, informed, emotionally affected, changed opinion, inspired, proud of institution)? We think that there should be a coordinated visual hook in addition an educational hook.

D. Planning and integration. An exhibit, from idea to completion, is a complicated and, hopefully, a thoughtfully planned experience. If one tackles any other schol-

arly work, they would plan, draft, involve colleagues, establish goals and objectives, and do all of the deliberate managerial steps to help ensure a successful product. Exhibits should not be different.

While many people are ready to help hang the exhibit, time should be spent planning early in the concept, writing textual support, layout, and preparing traffic patterns and visual goals before you just start "hanging." The text or other methods of presenting the information (audio, video, interactive computer) must be done in concert with the educational goals of the project. An integrated, planned exhibit at its many levels produces the best results. However, in defense of those who prepare and plan exhibits, there are spur of the moment opportunities and demands that make complete planning an ideal not always a reality.

E. Exhibits team. We recommend a collegial approach (i.e., project team, committee, task force, work group) to the exhibit process, since it is difficult to find one individual who has all the needed strengths in visual design, project conceptualization, marketing, layout, and writing. Examples of roles played by a variety of our library staff included: idea generator, layout designer, artifact preparer, labeler, bibliographer, procurer, builder, scheduler, writer, event planner, caterer, security planner, interpreter, photographer, videographer, lighting designer, marketer, and conservation specialist. Everyone can contribute something to the team, but there needs to be an overall coordinator.

Further reading

- Wayne Weigand, "This Month, 107 Years Ago," *American Libraries* 31, no. 6 (June/July 2000):127.
- Norman Morton, "Anatomy of Community Relations Success," *American Libraries* 32, no. 2 (February 2001): 40-42.
- Lissa Lord, "Keeping Our Word" *C&RL News* 60, no. 8 (September/October 1999): 629-632, 644.
- Sherry Lynch, editor, Chap. 2-4 in *The Librarian's Guide to Partnerships*, (Highsmith Press, Wisconsin, 1999).

F. Types of exhibit venues. You may be surprised by how many potential exhibit spaces exist in your library. Samples of our found space include:

- fixed display case at entry (traditional glass shelved unit best for attention-grabbing exhibits that need protection);

- portable eight-foot high exhibit wall that can be configured in multiple ways using Velcro technology to hold components (this is a nontraditional format for libraries, but common in trade shows, the material cannot be unique or protected, but this is a very flexible and quick venue);

- stationary flat display cases near Special Collections (traditional tool best in supplementing Special Collections exhibits for material needing security);

- curriculum materials center using a large bulletin board, similar to ones used in public schools, which is great for student art and flat exhibits not needing security;

- 60-foot exhibition wall, approximately 12-feet high, with adjustable spotlights. This traditional exhibition space is supplemented with Plexiglas cases for showing three dimensional artifacts. This area is used for major art exhibits and museum displays and is painted and repaired after each use.

- special collections room has an integrated display space, including a large flat wall (reusable), two large glass security display cases, and various furniture surfaces.

- Archives has two sites, one inside of the room itself with some wall surfaces and portable cases, as well as a second long display wall outside of the room; and

- other open areas can be used with easels, ceiling hung displays, cabinet surfaces, and standing artifacts.

We have invested in a variety of display tools to support our exhibits, such as Plexiglas cases, book holders, pillows, por-

table Velcro walls, portable museum walls, glass clip frames, reusable picture frames, die cut letter machine and the requisite foam core, fabrics, glues, tools, and other supplies.

Venues can be categorized also by ownership, timeframe, cost, and learning delivery systems. It is important to classify the ownership of the exhibit to help identify responsible parties and budgetary divisions. The length of time the exhibit is displayed,

as well as the time within the academic year, are key elements of strategy. We have constructed a library-wide exhibit calendar to help plan and coordinate our many venues. The frequency of change in the exhibit space is a negotiable item, and one needs to balance exhibit turnover with educational goals and resources so that the

spaces are not changed haphazardly. Costs can be self-funded, grant funded, partnership funded, funded by the seat of your pants, un-funded, under-funded, over-funded, and disguised as funded from something else.

Venues can be flat surface informational, display case multidimensional, interactive, guided, Web-based, or some combination of the above. The existing space and budgets dictate the best approach for your exhibit. The key is to include analysis of space, ownership, cost, timeframe, and delivery systems as part of your earliest planning discussions.

While none of us are ready to subcontract as exhibit designers, we feel that, ready or not, through study, trial and error and mutual support we have all raised our professional abilities in the area of exhibit design, preparation, and management. We may have been surprised by our new roles, but we feel that the increasing emphasis on library exhibits is a vital part of our service mission. ■



A television monitor plays a video loop of scenes evoking the era in the same film-themed exhibit. The moving images and sounds help to further enhance the viewers' experience in what otherwise may be a static display.

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