The Library Is My Canvas: Art and Experiential Learning in an Academic Library

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The literature concerning experiential learning in academic libraries generally pertains to opportunities for student workers and library and information science students, along with case studies of experiential learning integration into the classroom. This article details the successful partnership between an academic library and university art program, demonstrating the library's progression from provider of traditional resources and space for displaying student artwork to experiential learning environment for project-based learning opportunities requiring total student involvement from conception to completion. These experiences provide for unique learning opportunities, beautification of the library, and expansion of the library's identity on campus as a learning space.

Introduction

The merits of learning by experience are evident in the library literature, starting with practicums and fieldwork as important elements of library and information science (LIS) education. Initially, workplace learning was the dominant philosophy in LIS, with theory in the curriculum and the importance of the classroom prominent from the 1920s until a swing back toward experience in the 1960s.[1] The broad term "experiential learning" encompasses practicums and fieldwork as well as internships, cooperatives, and a variety of approaches whose definitions are sometimes used interchangeably. Wurdinger and Carlson[2] identify five major approaches: active learning, problem-based (and inquiry-based) learning, project-based learning, service learning, and place-based learning. All of these approaches, with the exception of place-based learning, are common in the library literature. Active learning involves anything outside of the traditional lecture that engages students in classroom discussion with one another, such as debates or presentations. Problem-based and inquiry-based learning share the goal of fostering critical thinking skills by solving real world problems. Project-based learning allows students to plan their own projects grounded in their own interests. Service learning goes beyond volunteering and community service in that it must directly benefit the student in terms of "learning from service." What these approaches have in common and where they differ from internships, cooperatives, practicums, and volunteering is in their absolute requirement for reflecting on the experience. These topics are represented in the library literature, where those

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articles pertaining to art students are concerned mostly with collections and image resources. This article goes beyond such topics to endorse the use of project-based learning (PBL) as a source of meaningful experiences for art students. Markham[3] insists that PBL is not merely doing projects, but instead must involve formative feedback, guidelines, systematic evaluation, and a de-emphasis of the curriculum in favor of a "shift in power" to the student. The case studies covered in this article substantiate the effectiveness of PBL and can serve as a blueprint for establishing similar connections between libraries and art programs.

History/Background

Conversations regarding experiential learning in formal education can be found in the education literature dating from the late 1800s. An educator of the time suggested teaching Colonial history by allowing students to participate in activities that give them an idea of the Colonial lifestyle; another recommended teaching English composition by allowing students to reflect on their own experiences prior to writing.[4] Ideas such as these and criticism of the formal education of the day were a move away from an unnatural system of education designed as indoctrination for an industrial workforce.[5] A major shift in view point was built on the work of several luminaries from the areas of education, philosophy, and psychology, including major contributions from Bruner, Dewey, Freire, Jung, Kolb, Lewin, and Piaget, among others. At the forefront was Dewey, who espoused the need for a theory of experience in education to establish what he called an "organic connection between education and personal experience."[6] A central concept for Dewey was the belief that not all experiences lead to positive learning; a student requires guidance, to be supplied by the teacher as facilitator, in a reciprocal relationship with the student.[7] This idea that learning should not be a unilateral process was echoed by Freire in his now familiar disparaging of the traditional "banking" model of education, in which students are mere receptacles.[8] Proceeding from Dewey, Kolb devised a four-stage model of experiential learning based on a continual progression through personal experience, action/experimentation, reflection/analysis, and thinking/synthesis.[9] For Kolb, education supplies the means for the transformation of experience into higher forms of interpreting the world. Another contribution to the conversation was Dale's development of a Cone of Experience, which illustrates how different levels of experience equate to the amount of learning involved at each level. Dale segmented the requirements for learning into need, experience, incorporation (or synthesis) of the knowledge acquired, and use of that knowledge.[10]

Bruner's interest in learning was more concerned with cognitive development. He suggested three ways in which children model the world through experience: action, visual/sensory organization, and symbolic language.[11] Piaget, also interested in learning as it related to cognitive development, believed intelligence developed "only through an organization of successive actions performed on objects," or to put it more simply, as an outcome of actions between the individual and environment.[12] This idea was shared by Lewin, who held a gestalt view that a person's psychological nature comprises their psychological state along with that of their environment.[13] These concepts collapse into a framework for Dewey's theory of experience, which has been classified into six propositions.[14] To summarize, the framework emphasizes the process of learning, which involves creation of knowledge as what is known is upended by conflicting information. This process involves the whole person, including the person's environment.

This modern conception of experiential learning begins to appear regularly in the library literature in the 1970s, coincidently during activities by two organizations of the time—The

National Society of Experiential Education and The Association for Experiential Education—both of which are still in existence. An early introduction can be found among a 1990 collection of essays that endorsed Dewey's philosophy of experiential learning for library educators.[15] The guidelines suggested for inclusion in the library curricula advocate for use of the scientific method, well-intentioned tasks as the foundation for further learning, and real-world problem-solving as applied to specific problems. Since then, experiential learning has appeared in libraries and library education in various forms and levels of participation from librarians, with numerous references in the literature to its use in LIS education and information literacy instruction. Recent examples include service learning,[16] problem-based learning,[17] project-based learning,[18] game-based learning,[19] and inquiry-based learning.[20] For integration with courses in disciplines external to the library, librarians often facilitate experiential learning through provision of library resources such as media labs and primary source materials.[21] Often the library will be the direct beneficiary of student projects, such as the development of marketing plans for promotion or improvement of services.[22] A study done to test the effectiveness of experiential learning principles through application of Kolb's theory reported positive effects on both library teaching and learning.[23]

The University of Toledo (UToledo) is a public research university in Ohio currently serving about 17,000 students. Experiential learning in the UToledo Libraries is primarily project-based. Project-based learning has been described as "a systematic teaching method that engages students in learning knowledge and skills through an extended inquiry process structured around complex, authentic questions and carefully designed products and tasks."[24] It developed as a result of scientific investigation of learning and cognition that moved beyond traditional educational models to include sociocultural and personal experience within a constructivist framework.[25] It was driven by a move away from a classroom education system designed to accommodate an industrial society to one that blends knowledge and skill.[26] A key characteristic is an acknowledgement of students' natural propensity for learning. Projects are built around central concepts and principles of a discipline, tackle realistic topics, and require essential tools and skills. Projects are achieved through a process of "investigation, research, or reasoning," and usually involve some form of collaboration. Evaluation is typically done in stages as the project progresses, and assessment is performance based.[27]

Library Art Projects

In an article describing a twenty-four-hour drawing activity held in a library, Loughran, Carver, & Hassall relate that art students "sometimes feel that the library is not for them."[28] For the UToledo Libraries, engaging art students traditionally meant building a relevant collection of monographs; this began to change when David Remaklus, the library director of operations, pursued art students and faculty to display their work, establishing the library as a gallery space. This led to the library hosting lectures by visiting artists in collaboration with the school of art. It took a few years for the relationship to fully develop, with the library taking primary responsibility for reaching out to request artwork and programming. The art program at UToledo does not offer courses in art restoration and mural painting; the library in effect expanded the curriculum for art students by offering the opportunity to build skills in those areas. The first example of project-based learning with an art student involved the restoration of a rare six-foot diameter oceanographic geophysical globe that resides in the library (figure 1). The chair of the art department was contacted to help locate a capable student for the project; the

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FIGURE 1
Globe Restoration Project

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selected student came into the project with a basic skill set but little restoration experience. She relied on art faculty, literature, facilities personnel, and the director of library operations to put a plan together to safely remove decades of dirt to prepare the surface for painting. Concerns included proper detergents and how to use them, how to protect the surrounding areas, what paints were compatible with the original paint used, and how to safely reach all the surfaces of a globe that stands seven feet in the air. As part of the learning experience, the student helped erect borrowed scaffolding that surrounded the globe. This project was followed by one that required a much more demanding level of student involvement, and that adhered more closely to the definition of project-based learning—the Clock Tower Project. A distinguishing feature of the UToledo main campus is the clock tower that sits atop its main building, University Hall. When the library director of operations obtained an original set of UToledo tower clock hands, he imagined them as part of a mural in the William S. Carlson Library. The director then reached out to the chair of the art department to help locate an art student capable of undertaking such a project, who would find the learning experience challenging and beneficial, and could also benefit financially. It should be mentioned that while these students were hired to create the mural, this does not preclude receiving class credit for experiential learning projects.

Ultimately, two juniors in the BFA program who specialized in 2D art and had the requisite work ethic were recommended and hired (figure 2). The project spanned the 2018–19 school year; each artist worked 10–15 hours per week, with time off over holidays and when school demands were too great. Expenses for the project included $2,500.00 to mount the clock hands, $500.00 for paint and supplies, and a $10.00 per hour salary (a significant amount in relation

FIGURE 2
Clock Tower Mural

to the state's minimum wage at that time). In total, the project cost approximately $7,600.00 in salaries. In this case, students were paid from the library's operating budget (other potential funding sources include the art program, office of the provost, or a university level fund that supports experiential learning). Both artists were involved in other library projects during the year. Their skills were utilized for events and the creation of promotional materials. Roughly $10,000 in salaries was spent in total.

The role of the library was solely to facilitate the project and provide the artists with the necessary tools and supplies to accomplish their work; the artists had the freedom to create the mural they felt met the needs of the library and the university. Some input was offered, and ideas were discussed with the library director, but no more than absolutely necessary. The artists commented that this freedom was very different from what they experienced in the art program, where student work can be much more focused and heavily critiqued. This freedom was very much appreciated, and at the same time made the students anxious, as it required the artists to own the success or failure of the project. Course instruction taught them to critique their own work, which helped them with this minimally supervised project.

While experiential learning students are given a fair amount of autonomy in creating their work, a certain level of supervision is necessary. Those with little employment background will at times need additional supervision, especially in the areas of time and material management. Furthermore, when students are assigned additional duties such as aiding with library exhibits and programming, supervisors must coordinate the work.

FIGURE 3
Clock Tower Mural Rear Wall

It may be difficult to firmly grasp the amount of time necessary to plan for and create a piece of artwork. Such work cannot be estimated the way a contractor might use square footage to estimate labor and material cost. The goal is to educate students--the artwork is secondary. Since students are learning on the job, productivity is based on the progression of the mural and the students' time and effort. Bi-weekly meetings with the students were arranged to discuss progress and concerns. Also, the work taking place in public spaces allowed for easy monitoring of progress; constant contact with the students throughout the week provided the opportunity for impromptu discussion. This was the artists' first experience with a large public commissioned piece. The project needed to be meaningful to the artists on a personal level, satisfy the library as a customer, and be appropriate for the designated space. It was necessary for the artists to have a detailed plan so they could convey their ideas to the client (the library director of operations) before moving forward, as opposed to working spontane-ously. Planning ahead also allowed for clear communication of ideas between the two artists, which resulted in a mural that is uniquely UToledo. The finished mural is two sided: the front showcases the clock face and the rear the inner workings of the clock (figures 2–3). The clock hands on the front and the sprockets cut from plywood and painted to look like steel mounted to the back are three dimensional. The concept of a two-sided mural is quite unusual and offered the artists the opportunity to create very different views of the same concept. It

showcases the gothic architecture and areas of study/career tracks (painted in the mortar of the stonework, conceptually the "glue" holding the university together), which make the mural somewhat interactive, as students are regularly seen trying to locate their majors on the wall. At the same time, abstract elements represent the converging paths of incoming students and the shattering of glass to represent graduation and moving forward, or possibly the shattering of future glass ceilings. In sum, the mural represents the students, where they come from and where they are going, and is an homage to the city of Toledo and the university.

This project was beneficial in many ways. The students had the opportunity to be creative, apply and expand on classroom learning, and solve problems. Due to the complexities and scale of the project the students found themselves continually reflecting on their work and making adjustments as necessary. It provided opportunities for them to showcase their work and for the library to utilize the student expertise available on campus. The students had occasion to lead and collaborate on a large project from design to completion, with minimal input, which required compromise and effective communication. They needed to set and meet goals to keep the project moving as planned, and to satisfy the client's needs as well. They learned to work within a budget by managing time and materials appropriately. Moreover, the students learned new skills, such as laying out a design on a large surface, mixing colors on a large scale, and using a computer numerical control router to cut plywood into shapes.

There were residual benefits as well. Working on the main floor of a very busy library created a performance art setting with constant questions from fellow students watching the work take place. The artists really enjoyed this immediate feedback/interaction from their audience, as students were often forthright with their comments. This is an experience most art students never get. Additionally, the entire process was documented by the library with daily photos of the mural, which were used to create a time lapse video montage accompanied by a recorded interview of the artists discussing their work. The interview presented yet another opportunity to reflect on the work done and what was learned from the experience. This content was given to the students to add to their electronic portfolios at the end of the project. As an additional bonus, the students received media promotion in several campus publications as well as in the city's newspaper, the *Toledo Blade*. Post project, both artists expressed confidence in their ability to create murals and other larger scale projects, and pride in creating a piece of work that thousands of UToledo students will be able to see.

The success of the clock tower project paved the way for future experiential learning projects. The following year two BFA students designed and created a large-scale cityscape mural that brings iconic buildings in the Toledo area into a unified image (figure 4). The mural depicts the University of Toledo and its relationship to its community; it is located on the library's second floor, in a high visibility area adjacent to a Starbucks Restaurant. The learning experience for this project was assessed for the purpose of improving the next experience. For example, prior to work beginning on the cityscape mural a formal business proposal to a small group of library representatives was required. This is an experience many art students do not get in the classroom but will be important when working with future clients. Proposals include design options, time frame, material budget, and process.

In addition to large installations, students also gain experience working on smaller projects such as displays and exhibits. One example involved an installation designed to showcase Toledo's war effort with special attention given to women in industry (figure 5). The project required the student to re-create a vintage advertisement promoting the Willys Jeep (manu-

**FIGURE 4
Cityscape Mural**

**FIGURE 5
Willys Jeep Reading Room**

FIGURE 6
Family Space Mural

factured in Toledo) painted above an actual military Jeep grill mounted to a wall. Lastly—also on the second floor—is a crowd favorite, a children's mural located in a family space created to accommodate students with children (figure 6). For these smaller projects, the students have differing levels of freedom to conceptualize and create. They are opportunities to work as a team with the library staff to create library programming.

Conclusion

Mural painting and globe restoration might not be topics covered in detail in the classroom; however, the basic knowledge necessary to accomplish these projects is. The clock tower mural and other library experiential learning projects allow students to take classroom knowledge and expand on it in a supportive and educational environment. Being faced with new experiences in a work environment helps the students to make connections to what they've learned in the classroom as well as aids in the generation of ideas. These valuable experiences offered in the library have enhanced the educational curriculum, allowed students to earn an income while fulfilling a library need, and contributed to future successes such as graduate school admissions and employment opportunities. Furthermore, the library spaces benefited from the resulting public art, and the nature of some of the projects aligned with the institution's strategic planning goal of engaging the community. This partnership at UToledo continues to provide unique learning opportunities for students, resulting in beautification of the library environment while adding another dimension to the value of the library. Outreach for experiential learning opportunities is not limited to art programs. As one example, the UToledo Libraries participated in a service learning project that involved the creation of na-

tive plant gardens on campus, in which students learned about sustainability, conservation, and biodiversity.

Academic libraries are constantly called upon to demonstrate value to their institutions. At UToledo, emphasis on student retention and academic success compels university administrators to have less interest in traditional measures of library value such as usage statistics and head counts. The focus is increasingly on how the library directly contributes to the curriculum and the educational process. The examples provided here demonstrate a unique approach to experiential learning in academic libraries and provide concrete evidence for the sort of support asked of libraries.

Acknowledgements

Notes

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