

Information literacy and the arts

Be there . . . or miss it!

by Priscilla Atkins

Information literacy is highly valued at our library; the library mission statement emphasizes “fostering a community of information literate, lifelong learners” and “reaching a variety of information needs.” So in August 1999, when I was appointed Hope College’s first arts librarian, a position justified by the unique needs of the specific disciplines constituting “the arts”—Art, Theatre, Music, Dance, and Creative Writing—I proposed to spend time with some of the Arts classes and Arts faculty as part of my Fall 2000 sabbatical in order to increase the library’s effectiveness in fostering information literacy in this area.

My primary goal was to become better acquainted with the Arts classes and Arts students and faculty at the college in order to become a more effective steward for the information needs of these departments. What I did not know was the extent to which my experiences would both reinforce and broaden my vision for how a reference/instruction librarian might best serve her colleagues and patrons in the information-rich environment of this new century by being with students and faculty outside the library, on their turf, so to speak, in classrooms and studios, theatres and offices, galleries, and hallways.

A brief diary of my visits to classes in theatre, art, creative writing, and an interdisciplinary arts course sets the stage—fills in the

background—for a list of tips librarians and other educators may find useful in fostering information literacy in the arts, and perhaps other disciplines.

Spending time in the theatre department

Due to time constraints, and with the understanding that this initial foray would serve as a gateway into exploration of all of the arts, I focused on the departments of Theatre and Art during my sabbatical. In Theatre, I visited acting classes, the principles of design class, theatre crafts class, lighting design class, directing class, introduction to theatre class, stage management class, and several of the production meetings for the musical “Steel Pier.” In November, I attended production meetings for “The Rimers of Eldrich” and “A Midsummer Night’s Dream,” both to be performed in the spring semester.

When I approached this project, my main goals were to get a sense of what students are asked to do in theatre classes, to think about how the library could most effectively support them, as well as to get to know the theatre faculty better. What in fact happened was that I was swept off my feet. I am now in utter awe of the theatre department at Hope College.

I stumbled onto the fact that what in education lingo is called “group work,” and in

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corporate lingo “team effort,” is manifested in its good and true and human and imperfect and perfect forms in a college theatre department—all the time.

The theatre department is an academic department—a very rigorous one—and it is a theatre company—an extremely talented and successful one. The critically acclaimed productions staged by the Hope College theatre department are a result of the constant and intense collaboration of all of the theatre faculty and staff. Reaching consensus over and over during the creative process of play-making is extremely demanding of each individual’s time, intelligence, and emotions. To be included in the theatre’s production meetings was to be invited to the heart of the artistic process.

By attending many classes and one rehearsal, I also had the opportunity to observe and experience firsthand the enthusiasm and dedication of theatre students. And, inadvertently, it gave the theatre students a chance to know me. When I walk into the theatre building now, I am greeted by friends everywhere. I have been a theatregoer for years, but this sabbatical experience allowed me to learn how much I didn’t know about what goes on behind the scenes.

Hanging out in art classes

Attending classes and critique sessions and simply nosing around in the art studios and classrooms in the art building felt very comfortable to me. I was privileged to stand at the edge and watch as students in the beginning sculpture classes applied concepts of shape, form, and composition to three-dimensional self-portraits in cardboard.

In a beginning design class, I was able to observe the introductory lessons in a software program that students would use in an assignment for designing CD jackets—an assignment in which they were asked to take all elements, including the barcode, credits, and company logo, into consideration.

During a class on early Baroque painting, I listened and watched as students compared the Madonna paintings of various renaissance masters. As a fellow teacher, I was envious of the automatic attention-holders integrated into every art class: I don’t think I ever saw teachers simply talk to a class, they always had an image or object up on a screen

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or in their hands or on a table or leaning on an easel.

Art History is one long, fascinating story made up of many, many interwoven stories (intersecting all disciplines). Whether a class was history or studio, there was a continuous referral to works by specific artists that students were exposed to and/or encouraged to pursue on their own. After attending only a few classes, particular faces grew familiar to me, and vice versa.

Encounter with the Arts: a class for everyone

I also was able to attend several class sessions and out-of-class events for the Encounter with the Arts course, a four-credit class that introduces students to the visual and performing arts via attending exhibitions and performances on evenings and weekends, as well as in-class lectures and demonstrations. (One evening, in the lobby of the DeVos Center for the Performing Arts in Grand Rapids, I heard a student spontaneously and sincerely thank her professor for giving her the chance to attend a production of Puccini’s “Madama Butterfly,” the first opera she had ever seen performed live.)

Perhaps due to its large enrollment, interdisciplinary nature, and rotating leadership, the Encounter with the Arts course is not a course the library has targeted for instruction. However, as I appreciated the tremendous breadth the class offers students for experiencing, thinking, and talking about the arts, I realized there was an opportunity here for librarians to connect students to the multi-

tude of resources in the arts. It is a class I wish every student at Hope had the opportunity to attend.

Visiting a creative writing class

Although my focus was on theatre and the fine arts, I also visited classes in creative writing, which is an option for emphasis within the English major.

When I was sitting in on a fiction class, a student asked a visiting writer how she had gone about writing a particular story (the story involved a young woman working in a circus when a tiger gets loose). The author talked about how she had worked with the circus when she was the students' age and a tiger, in fact, had gotten loose. She talked about reading lots of books about tigers, especially to learn about tiger attacks, behavior, etc. This led her into a discussion about how much time she spends doing research for the fiction she writes. For a chapter in a novel she's currently working on, she needs to know about the specific habits of woolly bear caterpillars, and she is using books, librarians, government agencies, and Web sites in her quest.

I used this as an opportunity to jump in and talk to the students about the library and how it is used by writers. I have done this many times over the years in my capacity as a poet when invited to speak to creative writing classes. The writing students get to know me as a writer, and many of them stop by the reference desk after meeting me in class. They not only ask for help with English assignments, but with assignments in other classes, as well. They are willing to approach me for help because they know me.

Tips for fostering information literacy in the arts

- *Contribute to or create a departmental or class resource guide.* Find out if the departments in the arts have some sort of survival guide for majors, or for specific courses in the discipline. Offer to write a section on information resources.

Certain classes may be especially appropriate for such guides. For instance, in the Theatre Department's directing class, I could find out which plays were going to be used as teaching vehicles and design a resource list. Attending production meetings for plays gives the librarian the opportunity to gather resources

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for the chosen "world of the play"—time period/geographic location.

- *Target specific classes to visit at least once a semester.* These visits may involve giving a brief plug about information resources or simply give you a chance to get to know what is going on. If nothing else, it gives the students contact with a librarian, increasing the likelihood that they will be comfortable asking for help later.

During a visit to a critique session in an intermediate level painting class, I heard the instructor mention two artists' work for a student to consult as she proceeded with her self-portrait. I jotted down the artists' names and later left printouts of books we owned on the student's easel. The student did check the books out and, in a subsequent critique session, the instructor made use of the illustrations while instructing the class.

- *Target specific classes for instruction sessions in the library.* The particular classes for which library sessions would be most beneficial may differ from institution to institution. Both theatre history and art history classes, for which in-depth research is expected, demonstrate a need for this kind of instruction.

- *Review the library's collections (electronic and print) in the arts.* Sitting in on classes allows you to become more attuned to particular sections of the collection. For instance, during an introductory design class in which the students were building a design portfolio, I realized I was unaware of what resources the library had to offer in this area and made a note to pursue this.

Conclusion

In short, I learned during the semester I focused on information literacy and the arts that you have to be there. Academic librarians have many roles and responsibilities and not a lot of time on their hands. However, it is crucial

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principle. The institute later decided to scan the archive, which will lead to new and interesting opportunities for technical cooperation between us, and should result in an end-product that is much more accessible to scholars worldwide.

Possible student visit: One enterprising UWM faculty member with an existing interest in the choral music of eastern Europe has responded enthusiastically to publicizing our Slovenian music materials. She has begun to program the music in local concerts, both on and off campus, and is planning to take the UWM student choristers on a summer trip to Slovenia in 2002, where they will give concerts, perhaps with Slovenian students.

Slovenia boasts four excellent summer music festivals. I was privileged to attend a student concert at one of them, the Brezice Early Music Festival 2000, where a most impressive student ensemble from Krakow, Poland, was performing.

Commission: During the mid-1990s I would occasionally joke to colleagues that our Ermenc fund was sufficiently large enough that if the Slovenian music we wanted didn't exist, we could commission it. A wonderful moment came when I realized that institutional policy changes at UWM would permit me to do exactly that.

The UWM Library has therefore commissioned a piece of music from an accomplished Slovenian composer and, given a successful outcome, may commission further works. This is another example of how a deepening network of contacts and trust can produce new options.

In summary, what was at its inception a very low-key, traditional type of library operation to collect specialized material has been developed into a multifaceted, active, and highly rewarding venture in international library cooperation with direct links to scholarship and learning.

The benefits of increased knowledge and awareness of a little-known part of Europe are accruing to UWM students, faculty and staff, including library staff; the local Slovenian-American community in southeast Wisconsin is delighted to find out more about its ethnic homeland; and in Slovenia, the music community now has Milwaukee firmly in its sights as a primary center of interest and activity. ■

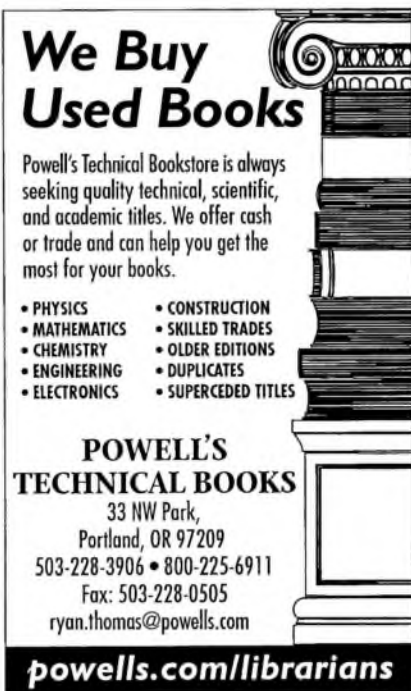
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that we fit outside-the-library/inside-the-classroom time into our schedule.

Spending time in classrooms, listening in on discussions, being aware of the spontaneous suggestions/ideas/topics that arise during a class (or meeting) that either students or faculty or both want to pursue gives the librarian the opportunity to be there at the moment of need. Being able to advertise then and there the kinds of resources students and faculty have available to them is far more meaningful than instructing them when they don't perceive an immediate need.

Beyond advertising our wares, librarians can follow-up with e-mail, campus mail, or even by delivering a book or two to the office, classroom, studio. Over the course of a semester, seeds can be planted for future library sessions, individual appointments with students, and class-tailored resource guides.

More and more, I see the pivotal role of librarians as one of relationship-builder: the better you and your patrons know each other, the more comfortable you are with each other, the better you are able to know their needs and to serve them. ■



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