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Who invited the librarian? Studio critiques as a site of information literacy education

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Who invited the librarian?

Studio critiques as a site of information literacy education

Abstract

The 'Framework for information literacy for higher education', the guiding document for academic instruction librarians in North America, encourages a deep connection between information literacy and discipline-specific teaching practices. In the context of art librarianship, one means of attaining this connection is via librarian participation in studio critiques. Critiques enable librarians to identify the similarities between the research process and the creative process, making information literacy relevant for art students. In two different institutional examples, the Framework provides a conceptual grounding for studio critiques as a collaborative space between librarians and faculty, where students learn lifelong information literacy and critical thinking skills that enrich their artistic work.

Introduction

Academic librarians teaching information literacy within subject disciplines tackle many challenges. Foremost is making relevant for students the relationship between navigating the rapidly shifting information landscape and successful mastery of a particular course of study. The 'Framework for information literacy for higher education' ('the Framework'), currently the guiding document for academic teacher-librarians in North America, encourages a deep connection between information literacy and discipline-specific teaching practices. In the context of art librarianship, one means of attaining this connection is via librarian participation in studio

critiques. A standard pedagogic tool in art education, critiques enable librarians to identify the similarities between the research process and the creative process, making information literacy relevant for art students.

The authors, both U.S.-based, research and instruction librarians who work with students and faculty in studio art programs at two different institutions, view studio critiques as a fruitful site of connection between information literacy concepts and studio art education. They situate their participation in critiques within other studio art-specific information literacy teaching practices influenced by the Framework and encourage art librarians to consider how an enhanced definition of information literacy can inspire more impactful teaching practices within the discipline. Ultimately, they argue that the Framework provides a conceptual grounding for studio critiques as a collaborative space between librarians and faculty, where students learn lifelong information literacy and critical thinking skills that enrich their artistic work.

The Framework and Disciplinarity

The Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL), a division of the American Library Association (ALA), is the predominant professional organization for academic librarians working in North America. Since 2000, ACRL has provided resources that define the concept of information literacy and offer guidance to librarians teaching research skills in a higher education context, most notably with the 'Standards for information literacy for higher education' ('the Standards'). In 2013, the association convened a task force to reassess the Standards' relevancy and to offer revisions. After several rounds of drafts and public feedback solicitation, the Framework was officially adopted in 2015, and in 2016 the ACRL Board of Directors voted to rescind the Standards. This made the Framework the sole guiding document for North American librarians engaged with information literacy education.

The Standards defined information literacy as 'a set of abilities requiring individuals to recognize when information is needed and [the ability] to locate, evaluate and use effectively the needed information'.[1] Intended as an assessment framework, it outlined five standards, each including a set of measurable performance indicators and learning outcomes. In contrast, the Framework defines information literacy as 'the set of integrated abilities encompassing the reflective

discovery of information, the understanding of how information is produced and valued, and the use of information in creating new knowledge and participating ethically in communities of learning'.[2] It is emphatically not a prescribed list of skills and outcomes; rather, it encourages academic librarians and their campus partners to take a conceptual approach to information literacy and adapt its application to their local institutions. Rooted in the educational theory of threshold concepts,[3] the Framework presents six concepts (or 'frames') that are central to information literacy, and outlines knowledge practices and dispositions that support each frame.[4] With the Framework, there is a greater emphasis on the affective dimensions of learning (i.e. how knowledge is meaningful to a person's worldview and identity) and on the individual as a creator, as well as a consumer, of information.

The Framework enables new possibilities for librarians teaching information literacy within disciplinary contexts. Because it positions information literacy as its own discipline rather than a set of discrete skills, the Framework allows for the consideration of interdisciplinarity beween information literacy and a given subject area. Rebecca Kuglitsch considered this idea in her article, 'Teaching for transfer: reconciling the framework with disciplinary information literacy', in which she attempted to negotiate the tension between 'information literacy as a generalizable skill and as a skill within the disciplines'.[5] She proposed that librarians adopt the pedagogical technique of teaching for transfer: encouraging learners to recognize the applicability of skills and concepts across a range of contexts.[6] Through this practice, overarching conceptual definitions of information literacy are retained and contextualized according to the disciplinary communities of practice within which they are taught. The goal is to provide students with the ability to apply information literacy skills to new situations as they arise -- both within an academic program of study and beyond.[7]

Exploring the Framework in Art Librarianship

It is clear from a survey of literature published since 2014, the year ACRL released the first draft of the Framework for review, that art librarians are investigating these expanded opportunities for disciplinary information literacy instruction. Notably, art librarians have used the Framework to identify similarities between the research process and the creative process. In the first instalment, published in January 2015, of a multi-part study exploring the research habits of

undergraduate studio art students and the potential impact of information literacy instruction,[8] Katie Greer drew parallels between the Framework's conceptual approach and the process of art-making. Both value the affective dimension of learning (e.g. drawing from personal experience for inspiration) and the practice of meta-cognition.[9] In September 2015, Larissa Garcia and Jessica Labatte described using threshold concepts, the theoretical backbone of the Framework, as metaphors for the creative process. They found that these concepts could connect theoretical considerations of information literacy to discipline-specific practices in studio art to enrich both the process of art-making and the final work.[10]

The Framework has also impacted the conversation about information literacy in art librarianship in ways that are not overtly apparent. In February 2016, Kristina M. Keogh and Stephen A. Patton argued for deeper librarian-faculty collaborations in visual arts programs. Librarians, they claimed, can leverage their knowledge and expertise in these partnerships for recognition of their roles not just as service providers, but as educators.[11] While Keogh and Patton did not mention the Framework, their work is very much situated within the document's emphasis on librarians as disciplinary experts in information literacy and the vital importance of faculty collaborations in teaching students these concepts.[12]

Art librarians are also mindful that the shifting definition of information literacy influences disciplinary practices beyond the institutional level. In the most recent article about information literacy in studio art at the time of writing, Elsa Loftis and Jennifer Martinez Wormser described a project to produce a series of online information literacy tutorials for schools in the Association of Independent Colleges of Art and Design (AICAD), a consortium of North American art schools.[13] The tutorials, intended to address a perceived 'lack of integrated information literacy curriculum' among the member institutions, were developed such that learning outcomes are mapped to the Framework.[14]

From this overview of the literature published since the Framework's introduction, it is apparent that art librarians are exploring, in diverse ways, the expanded possibilities for teaching information literacy. Considerations of inter-/disciplinarity and how information literacy enriches studio art education leads us to a discussion of the studio critique practice.

Studio Critiques in Art Education: Connecting the Framework

Critiques are a standard pedagogic tool of studio art education. Traditionally they centre around artwork, with the student artist present and a group of student peers, faculty and guests invited to respond to the work. As an assessment tool, faculty use critiques to evaluate student progress and assist in creative development. While they often mark the completion of a project, semester, or program, critiques may also take place several times throughout the semester so that students can incorporate comments and suggestions into current or future projects.

In addition to the opportunity to gather feedback, critiques are useful in helping students consider 'the historical and contemporary art world contexts'[15] with which their work is in dialogue. Faculty often note other artists, movements, or resources that may serve to inform and inspire. As Terry Barrett observes, critiques are successful when 'the student leaves the experience better informed, slightly more literate in the language of criticism and aesthetic analysis, and a stronger artist'.[16] It is this aspect of studio critiques where research can illuminate and inform the creative process and where there is opportunity to integrate information literacy into studio art education.

In fact, it is possible to utilize the Framework to identify inherent similarities between the research process and studio critiques. In Garcia and Labatte's article about threshold concepts as metaphors for the creative process, they note that there is a connection between the frame 'scholarship as a conversation' and the studio critique process; therefore, understanding the concept can help prepare students for this type of evaluation.[17] To expand on this idea, one can compare many of the characteristics or elements of critiques to the knowledge practices and dispositions of this particular frame. For example, while it is the task of those participating in the critique to respond to the work, the student artist should be 'present, ready, and willing to enter into a conversation'.[18] Here, there is a clear link to the disposition that students should 'understand the responsibility that comes with entering the conversation through participatory channels'.[19]

A vital element of the critique process is the feedback the artist receives from participants. Those present offer suggestions for revisions or even different approaches to take. However, the artist

must evaluate these comments and decide whether to incorporate them into the work. This ability to 'critically evaluate contributions made by others in participatory information environments' is also a key knowledge practice for the 'scholarship as conversation' frame.[20]

As noted earlier, it is during critiques that students also learn more about the canon of art history and contemporary artists. This relates to the knowledge practice about identifying 'the contribution particular articles, books, and other scholarly pieces make to disciplinary knowledge'.[21] In Kendall Buster and Paula Crawford's *The critique handbook*, they state, '[K]nowledge of the world and culture can only enrich you--whether literature, scientific study, personal experiences, or travel. Knowledge of historical and contemporary practice places you in a larger, stimulating conversation.'[22] The connection to information literacy as illuminated by the framework is obvious in the similar language and metaphor used—both refer to a 'conversation.' It is research that allows artists to participate in 'a larger, stimulating conversation'.

The most powerful connection between information literacy and studio critiques reflects a way of thinking that instils confidence and agency in student artists. A critical disposition for the 'scholarship as conversation' frame is that students consider themselves not just consumers of information and scholarship but also contributors and creators.[23] The goal for many art students is to develop their distinct, creative voice so that they can contribute meaningfully to the world of art; unwavering confidence that one's self-expression or contribution is essential to the creative process.[24] By participating in critiques, librarians can show students how research positively influences their work and builds their confidence as artists.

Librarian Participation in Studio Critiques

School of the Museum of Fine Arts at Tufts University

The School of the Museum of Fine Arts at Tufts University (SMFA), located in Boston, Massachusetts, offers Bachelors of Fine Arts and Masters of Fine Arts degrees in a range of studio art disciplines. Most formalized information literacy education happens in the context of the BFA program. Currently, most BFA students attend two foundational information literacy sessions in their first-year composition classes where they learn about library spaces and collections, definitions of research and strategies for evaluating information. So far, these

sessions are the only structured point of contact between students in the BFA program and Ashley Peterson, the Research & Instruction Librarian for the SMFA. Beyond the first year, many studio art course instructors schedule research sessions with the librarian, which are structured according to course content and build on the foundational skills and concepts students acquire in their first-year composition classes. In the fourth year of the BFA program, many students (about one-third to one-half of the cohort) are admitted to the Senior Thesis program, a year-long, research-and-writing intensive course that culminates in an artistic thesis project. The librarian works closely with this program, consulting with faculty to structure the research content of the course and meeting one-on-one with students to hone their research goals. Taken together, librarian involvement with first-year composition classes, subsequent studio work and the Senior Thesis program constitute a loosely programmatic approach to teaching information literacy in the SMFA's BFA program.

The Framework has had a positive impact on information literacy education practices at the SMFA. It has allowed librarians to contextualize local, discipline-specific teaching methods within a broader conversation about information literacy in higher education. The librarian's ultimate goal is to demystify research and its relationship to artistic production. To accomplish this, she encourages students to embrace the messy complexities of the research process and to make a metacognitive assessment of one's own research habits. Her approach is influenced by the Framework concept of 'searching as strategic exploration', which emphasizes the 'nonlinear and iterative' nature of information searching and the value of 'mental flexibility' in pursuing a diverse range of resources as one's research process develops.[25] Learners of this concept should take a thoughtful, informed approach to their research (define the scope of their project, develop a familiarity with a diverse variety of information resources) while also allowing for the unexpected: false starts, frustration, overwhelm, serendipitous discovery. Librarian participation in studio critiques supports mastery of this concept because it reinforces the connection between the creative process and the research process. Students in studio art programs already know that artistic work involves many hours of iterative, disciplined practice that often leads to unexpected results -- whether in the form of failure, in which case the student corrects course and tries again, or a breakthrough. The goal is to make clear that the research process is identical, and that the practices are mutually supportive. When a librarian is present at a critique, engaging a student in

conversation about the role of research in their creative process and its final output, this connection is solidified.

Participation in studio critiques began in the fall 2015 semester, when a studio course instructor invited Peterson, who earlier in the semester had taught a research skills session for the class, to attend the final critique. There, the librarian observed, and engaged students in conversation about, the extent to which their artistic work was shaped by their research. The instructor and the librarian felt very positively about the experience, which led to a deeper collaboration in one of the instructor's spring 2016 studio art courses. In this instance, they worked together to shape the research component of the course, and Peterson was a frequent guest in the classroom for research activities. She attended a mid-semester critique of work that resulted from a research assignment she helped create, and thus directly assessed how research practices taught in the course shaped student work. Peterson also attended the final critiques for the course, where she observed student progress and identified who might benefit from additional research consultations. Following the success of studio critique participation in the 2015-2016 academic year, the librarian now selectively offers this practice when scheduling research skills sessions with studio faculty. It is presented as a collaboration that reinforces the connection between a student's research and artistic practices.

NIU School of Art and Design
Northern Illinois University (NIU)'s School of Art and Design, located in DeKalb, Illinois, houses interdisciplinary degree programs at the undergraduate and graduate level in Art, Art History, and Art Education and also offers both Bachelor of Fine Arts (BFA) and Master of Fine Arts (MFA) degrees in a range of studio art disciplines. While there is no official information literacy component in these art and design programs, NIU faculty do request library instruction sessions on occasion and Larissa Garcia, the Art Subject Specialist, has had particular success working with photography instructors to integrate information literacy into their studio classes. Her collaboration with Jessica Labatte, Photography Professor, was described in an article referenced earlier in this paper; however, since that 2015 article was published, their work together has continued to evolve. Now, the research assignment for ARTD 468 Advanced Photographic Media, a 4-credit studio class, is a reading list of seven to ten sources that is due at

the end of the semester. To support this assignment, there are two library sessions for the course. The first session, which takes place within the first few weeks of the semester, introduces students to the idea of multidisciplinary research as an important source of inspiration and focuses on using the online book catalogue. The second session, scheduled after the first set of critiques, includes instruction on how to use library databases as well as more directed, personalized research examples based on comments gathered during critiques.

As with Peterson at the SFMA, an essential element of this newly developed information literacy component in the course is librarian participation in critiques. Garcia attends one set of critiques that take place during the first half of the semester. While Peterson engaged her students in conversations about their research and artistic process, in this instance, the faculty member asks her students about the effect of their research on the work. Here, the librarian serves more as an observer. When the professor suggests a particular artist, work, or movement for a student to consult, both the student and the librarian take note. By referencing other artists and thinkers, the instructor reinforces the idea of participating in a conversation as expressed in the Framework. In addition, students now have additional search terms to explore in resources during the next library session.

Like at the SFMA, the frame, 'searching as strategic exploration', serves as the guiding influence to connect the research process and the creative process for NIU art students. Before the second library session, Garcia pulls several books based on her notes from the critique. During the class, she likens 'strategic exploration' to searching for the artists, works or concepts that critique participants suggested. When students look for additional inspiration, they are recognizing 'the value of browsing and other serendipitous methods'[26] to help inform and improve their work. However, it is important to note that browsing for inspiration is often not aimless or purely accidental. There is intentionality or strategy in the exploration – specific artists to view or particular resources that would be more useful for finding information. Therefore, by using information from critique as a way to develop search strategies and locate additional sources for creativity, the librarian is modelling the behaviour she hopes students will emulate. Although students may not be working on these same assignments after the critique or after the second

library session, both the librarian and faculty member emphasize that browsing other artists or reading more in-depth on a particular topic, even if for a past project, can illuminate new work.

Studio Critique Participation: Overall Advantages and Challenges

While the authors believe that librarian participation in studio critiques is an invaluable opportunity to impact student learning, they recognize that there are significant challenges to undertaking this practice. Because these challenges are inherent to the greatest benefits of critiques as sites of information literacy education in a studio art program, they are worth considering in more detail.

One important consideration is the size and curricular structure of a given studio art program, which affects the frequency of student-librarian interaction. Critiques are most successful as a pedagogical tool, and viewed as a positive experience by students, when there is mutual respect and a level of caring and trust among those involved.[27] Peterson and Garcia meet with their students several times over the course of their academic programs. At the SMFA, this frequency is due to the small enrolment numbers of the BFA program; at NIU, not only are there few photography BFA majors, but these students must also take ARTD 468 four times to fulfil graduation requirements. This frequent contact between librarians and students creates a rapport that makes the critique experience more successful for both parties. Also important, when librarians have several meaningful and productive student encounters through library instruction sessions and critiques, they become part of the educational and creative process. Librarians are no longer simply helpful resources, but also collaborators in student learning, invested in the development of student artwork. When the nature of a program does not allow for frequent, structured interaction between students and librarians it can be difficult to foster this collaborative relationship.

It is also important to consider whether or not there is an opportunity to make connections between research and art making in a given critique. In Peterson's experience, she directly engaged with students about their research practices; in Garcia's case, the instructor required students to discuss how their research influenced the work. Professors conduct critiques in a variety of ways, and some may not actively encourage formalized research as part of the creative

process. In these instances, the instructors may prioritize the critique participants' impressions, feelings and emotions when 'reading' a work, so it may not be considered particularly relevant to bring in a discussion of outside sources. Without an active, like-minded collaborator in the instructor, it is difficult for the librarian to find an appropriate entryway into the creative process for students that includes valuing research.

The most significant challenge to participating in critiques is the time commitment and scheduling. Critiques often take place over the course of several class sessions, and studio art class meetings are frequently longer than the standard 60 or 90 minutes allotted for many academic courses. At NIU, studio courses meet twice a week for three hours; at the SMFA, they can last all day, from 9am to 5pm. Because of this, Peterson and Garcia are often not able to attend critiques in their entirety because of other responsibilities. The timing is also a consideration: some instructors schedule critiques midway through the semester; some schedule them at the end, and some do both. The authors have found that participating in mid-semester critiques allows librarians to suggest resources that can help students develop their work before the final projects are due, and provides an opportunity to identify students who may benefit from research consultations that will help develop the conceptual direction of their work. Attending final critiques enables librarians to see and engage students in conversation about completed work that incorporates research skills learned over the course of the semester, which can be an important component of an assessment practice. While the value of critique participation is clear, the authors acknowledge that finding the time to attend one round of critiques per semester, let alone two, can be extremely difficult.

Conclusion

Despite the challenges inherent to librarian participation in studio critiques, the authors feel strongly that it is a worthwhile practice. They recommend that art librarians, who have not already done so, consider participating in critiques to whatever extent they are able. The broader intent of this article, however, is to further the conversation about how the evolving definition of information literacy, as represented in North America by the Framework, has enriched art librarianship. Studio critiques are one site of possibility for enhanced information literacy

education within studio art disciplines. The authors eagerly anticipate discovering more, via participation in the vibrant art librarianship community of practice, in the years to come.

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