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Personal Archiving for Undergraduate Art Students

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Abstract
In 2019, the Art Department at Colorado College began piloting a Personal Archive project in select undergraduate studio courses that combined visual and digital literacy instruction with personal reflection and professional development. The authors, a Curator of Visual Resources and a Professor of Art, discuss the drive behind this initiative to develop student competencies within a liberal arts setting. This paper outlines the iterative process as well as select student activities and learning outcomes that may be adopted to various institutions. We also provide a summary of the current state of the Personal Archive project, which has been incorporated into the department curriculum.

Keywords
Archiving, arts education, collaboration, instruction, digital literacy, visual literacy.

Author Bios
Meghan Rubenstein is the Curator of Visual Resources at Colorado College where she oversees the Art Department's image collections and assists faculty and students with digital teaching, scholarship, and creative projects.

Kate Leonard is Professor of Art at Colorado College where she teaches Drawing, Printmaking, and 2D Design. In addition, she directs the Graphics Research Lab, a community centered printmaking and design program.

Introduction

The Personal Archive project started as a collaboration between a Curator of Visual Resources and a Professor of Art looking to integrate digital and visual literacy training into the art curriculum.[1] The result is a practice now regularly incorporated into studio classrooms. Undergraduate students digitally document their art-making process, research interests, and final work in a Microsoft Teams folder shared with their classmates. Along the way they are trained in photography, lighting, editing software, and file management. We introduce the term "personal archive" early on to provide a framework that encourages a practice that adheres to standards while allowing for conceptual approaches tied to writing histories and shaping narratives.[2] The outcome is that students understand the importance of documenting their artistic practice in a thoughtful and engaged way over the long-term. We also found that the art documentation process has led students to think about their work in new ways. This article provides a brief introduction to the origin of this project, outlines our objectives, and shares our experiences working together in and out of the classroom.[3] We also suggest how our collaborative process and classroom documentation practice might transfer to other institutions.

The co-authors, Kate Leonard and Meghan Rubenstein, have worked together for 10 years in the Art Department at Colorado College, a small undergraduate residential liberal arts program in Colorado Springs. In the Art Department, our majors pursue one of four tracks: Art Studio, Design Studies, Art History, or Museum Studies. Kate is a Professor of Art, teaching studio courses in Drawing, Printmaking, and 2D Design. Meghan is the Curator of Visual Resources and runs the day-to-day operations of the Visual Resources Center (VRC). The VRC is situated physically and structurally within the Art Department; its primary mission is to support the departmental faculty and students in their work with visual arts related media and technology.

The college has a unique curricular calendar known as the block plan. Professors teach, and students take, one class at a time for three and a half weeks, separated by a short block break. There are four blocks in the fall semester and four blocks in the spring semester. The intensity of this environment affects how we deliver our curriculum, how we iterate, and how we change our process from one day to the next. Classes are assigned to a single room or studio for the entire block; classrooms are not shared. Like any system, the block plan has its challenges, but it also has unique opportunities. One of the advantages of our department is that faculty, staff, and students work in close physical proximity and there is a shared eagerness to explore new teaching approaches in the classroom.

Our Personal Archive project does not have a single origin point but came together organically following several classroom experiences, including initial work on a mobile scanning cart for Kate's Technical Drawing course; Meghan's involvement with a summer Printmaking course, which utilized

[1] The authors wish to acknowledge our Colorado College students and Art Department collaborators, especially Heather Oelklaus, Donovan Dickey-Banmalley, Jean Gumpper, and Casey Millhone, who helped shape the initial stages of this project. We also thank the two anonymous reviewers for their feedback.

[2] Our use of the term "personal archive" was inspired by Heather Gendron, Neal Ambrose-Smith, Joan E. Beaudoin, and Eurnie Imm-Stroukoff, "Artists' Studio Archives: Managing Your Studio Practice & Building a Creative Legacy. Revised Edition," *Library Staff Publications* 17 (2022). The authors provide practical guidelines for artists and studio assistants to organize, and document works of art, focusing on long-term storage and accessibility. In addition, they introduce the idea that "having an archive is a way to take an active part in shaping the way your artwork and your legacy as an artist are perceived," which led us to consider the role of the person collecting information in creating a narrative (9). As the subjects of our students' archives are themselves, we emphasize the impact of their own choices related to what and how they document.

[3] This study received a Secondary Research Exemption from the Institutional Review Board at Colorado College (2025-04-16-MR-SR-1).

Artists' Studio Archives as a reference;[4] and various workshops in senior seminars with students on the Art Studio and Design Studies tracks. Repeated interactions with this cross-section of students made it clear that our senior Art majors were, in most cases, no more advanced than first- and second-year students in their ability to work with digital tools and images or think critically about the process. These collaborations fostered opportunity to make new processes that could be integrated into the classroom.

An example from an Art Studio course illustrates some of the areas we aimed to address through standardized training. In Kate's 200-level Technical Drawing course, students prepare an analog drawing for digital reproduction, scanning and editing their hand-drawn art for a specific printed output. They learn the concept of prepress work and how the output constraints of the printing processes determine the rendering techniques they use in their original illustrations. When creating an illustration for the student newspaper, students might render the appearance of continuous tone using line art techniques such as cross hatching and stippling. Like halftone dot patterns used in photographs, line art illustration techniques are visually impactful for single run black and white printing. The challenge Kate encountered was that while all students could learn the analog illustration techniques, many struggled when asked to move into the digital work. She noticed they felt challenged by what we originally considered to be simple concepts and basic knowledge, such as standardized naming conventions, file size, even opening and closing files on the computer. That brought Kate to consult with Meghan to brainstorm ways we could formalize student exposure to baseline digital literacy skills in the 100-level drawing class so all students entering 200-level Technical Drawing could move more effectively to the concepts of prepress formatting.

Figure 1: A student in the Technical Drawing course scanning on the mobile scanning cart.

As we started to design short classroom workshop sessions for students, another issue arose: students needed better access to equipment for digitizing and editing their work. Because of our block plan schedule, there are fewer than 24 hours between classes. The VRC, staffed by only Meghan and student employees, keeps hours from 8:00 am to 5:00 pm Monday through Friday. That window of time was not sufficient, nor were our two flatbed scanning stations. This led, in part, to the creation of the above-mentioned mobile scanning cart, a portable station for the classroom. The scanning cart consists of a large-format Epson flatbed scanner with laptop (Figure 1). The cart is at table height and has a flat top that allows equipment to easily slide to and from work surfaces. Additionally, we added to the classroom a second, smaller cart with a laser printer, extra ink, and other supplies for students to use to make quick output proofs. Making the technology mobile allowed students to use it in various areas of the studio and it also permitted the scanner cart to be rolled into a lockable closet if needed. Students are still able to use the VRC during business hours. With some of these issues in mind, we started to formalize how we could provide scaffolded training to students to support their growth as artists.

[4] Gendron et al.

Objectives

To integrate digital literacy training into the classroom, we first needed to rethink how students encounter technology. The VRC is a welcoming and flexible environment, but it is a technical space separate from their classroom and the making process. By providing access to digital tools, such as the mobile scanning cart and iPads—an additional technology we revisit later in the article, alongside analog drawing tools, students learn to make choices in the digitization process as they would in an analog drawing process. Allowing for these choices led to unexpected uses of technology in the classroom by students. For example, we found iPads draped over drawing boards or scattered on the floor among their drawing supplies (Figure 2). When digital technology is experienced as just one of many tools used in collaboration in the studio, students engage more actively and confidently with the scanners, iPads, and printers.

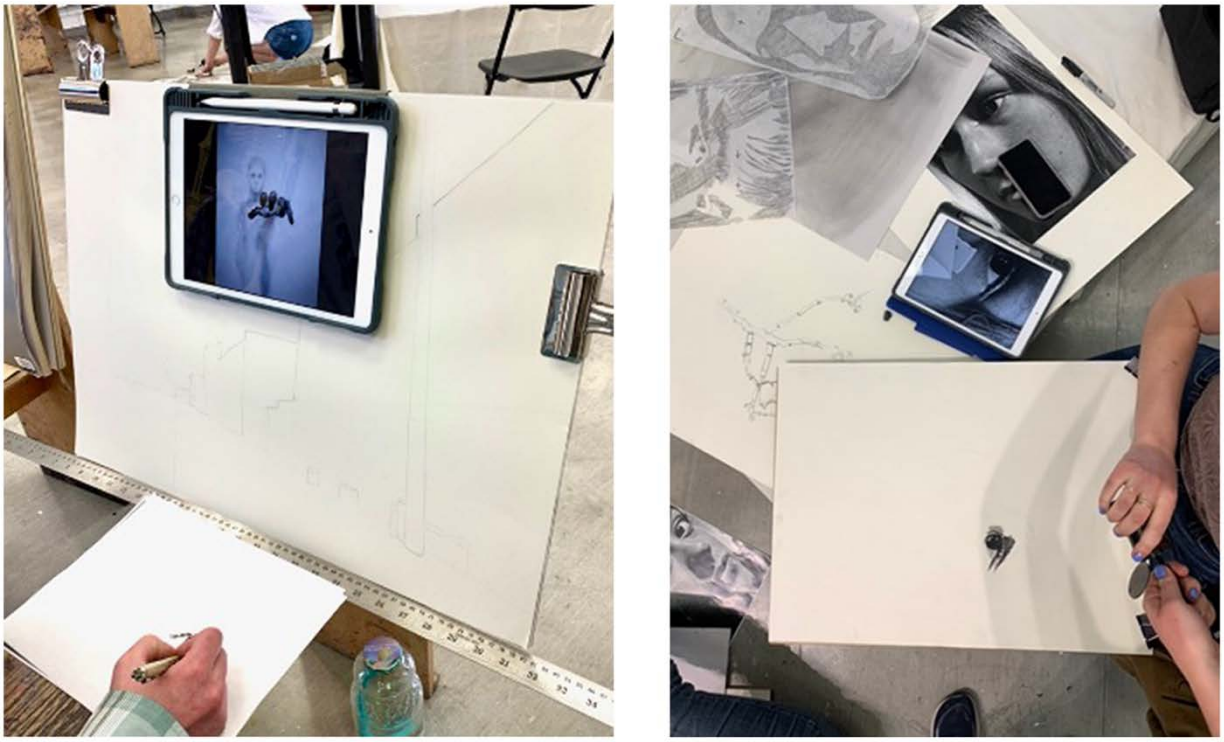

Figure 2: Examples of student iPad use in the drawing classroom.

The studio became an analog/digital hub, a space where the shared language of naming conventions, file type, and file size allowed for new kinds of conversation, critique, and peer exchange of creative ideas and solutions. In Figure 3, students are shown sketching out their ideas for a group project on the studio white board. For this assignment, "Un-Natural History," they had been asked to work together on the board to create a plan for the group Zine that would include each student's individual technical drawing of a mythological creature. Unprompted by Kate, they drew in a way that is structurally related to file previews in an online folder. Each student came up to the board and 'uploaded' an idea in a small 'preview' square adding a 'thumbnail sketch' and a name for their creature. Once they all had their thumbnail studies on the board, they turned to Kate and asked if Meghan could help them create a new folder on their class Microsoft Teams site named "Animal Drawings." It was a terrific teaching moment because we witnessed that the work of making their individual archives was now a practiced way of thinking, and it was expanding into the studio to help them communicate and organize in real time. The

start of the Personal Archive project was not only giving them shared language, but it was also giving them a shared system, an architecture that allowed them to build projects together.

Figure 3: Two students sketch out their ideas on the studio white board.

While many of the tools and processes piloted in the Technical Drawing course were eventually incorporated into the Personal Archive project, it was only at this point we took a step back to identify specific objectives, working with the idea that literacy is a process.[5] We focused on how we might scaffold learning within the department curriculum. For the beginning level courses, we selected basic skills that can be used as tools in the classroom and developed further through advanced work in the department. To do so meant that we tabled conceptually driven personal archiving conversations. We asked students to document an assignment and introduced them to: image size, file format, naming conventions, image quality (fidelity), file storage and backup recommendations. Depending on the course, students worked with software, such as Adobe Photoshop, Procreate, and Snapseed, and some, or all, of the hardware previously introduced. Our documentation stations vary, but we have used LED panel lights and introduced a color card to help talk though white balance during the editing process.

In the Classroom

In spring 2023, we selected two of Kate's drawing courses, Introduction to Drawing and Technical Drawing, to test the process. We set up a small documentation station in the classroom and created a shared class folder in Microsoft Teams, subscribed to by our institution. We agreed on file naming standards and selected the format.[6]

The Colorado College ITS department prepared an iPad cart, pre-loading the devices with the applications Procreate and Snapseed. Kate set the assignments that required digital documentation and/or digital tools.[7] We initially framed the introduction of this digital process as an invitation for students to participate with us in an exploratory project. To promote engagement, each student was assigned an iPad from the ITS cart, to draw digitally and photograph their work, and encouraged to view their classmates' digital files in the Microsoft Teams folders. The department Paraprofessional and Meghan checked images and worked with students as needed. The skills we taught were scalable based on available hardware at any given time.

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[5] Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL), *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education.* 2016. https://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework, 10

[6] We ask students to label files to include: course number, academic year, block, assignment, last name, first name (i.e. AS207_2223B8_LineArtFinal_Rubenstein_Meghan.jpg). We request jpgs in the entry level courses, but students in more advanced courses, such as Technical Drawing, learn about stable digital file formats. The creation of a standard naming convention across classes also facilitates our development of a department archive of class work.

[7] An advantage of collecting student work digitally is that faculty can revisit a body of student work away from the studio classroom. This perk has been a draw for other faculty members newly incorporating this digital documentation practice into studio courses.

As a teacher, Kate found it easier to introduce the project in the classroom as not only an exploration but also a pilot program. Rather than feel like she had to know every aspect of the hardware or software, she could pose a question to the class, such as: "Let's figure out three different ways to import a layer into Procreate." Then, she could ask students to break into groups, spend five minutes problem solving, make a quick screen-record of their solution, and report back to the larger group. Using this peer group approach not only took the burden off Kate to have all the answers, but it also modeled a way of approaching problem solving with technology. Several students reported they had greater confidence figuring things out with the technology because, as one student mentioned in a review, "Kate didn't always know what she was doing...but in a good way…she didn't let it phase her…She would say 'I don't know, but I know I can figure it out.' By the end of the class block I found myself thinking that too."

Some students are drawn to machines and technical processes, others are intimidated. Some have no problem working on a two-ton lithography press but are terrified to the point of shut-down by a multilayered Adobe workspace. Kate is always asking herself, how can I find ways to deescalate encounters with technology? In that context, there is an intentionalism to positioning technology physically in the studio to create low stakes activities and chance encounters. When students see a scanner and iPad sitting next to a refurbished 1940s business card press, they start to make connections and broaden their definition of digital technology (Figure 4). They recognize that these objects are single points on a long chronological history of technology.

Figure 4: Professor Kate Leonard in the classroom, where scanners and printers sit next to a 1940s printing press.

One thing we learned is that the environment in which students encounter technology is more important than either of us imagined and has an impact on how successful we are in meeting our

learning objectives. We recognized the need to provide access to technology in a variety of locations while encouraging peer-to-peer learning and making space for informal instruction. To facilitate the process, we began to intentionally position technology stations in the corners of the classroom, a place where one can "tinker" out of sight, figuring things out with a classmate.

In Figure 5, we offer an example of the outcome of a digital assignment in Technical Drawing. At the top are the students' analog drawings pinned up in the hallway. The three drawings in the center are digital archive images created by students. The digital submission labeling requirement for the class Microsoft Teams archive is circled in red. Working closely with students ensured that they were able to achieve a high level of refinement in their digital images.

Figure 5: Top: Examples of greyscale drawings pinned up in the hallway. Middle: Digital images of same drawings created by students. Bottom: Labeling convention for digital portfolio images.

Following four years of brainstorming, philosophizing, and investigating, our next iteration was to figure out how to transfer what we learned into another class, led by one of our Art Department faculty colleagues. The first test was during the fall of 2023, when we asked our faculty colleague to incorporate digital documentation into her Introduction to Drawing course. The department Paraprofessional led the initial demo using iPads, a photo documentation station, and Snapseed, rather than Kate or Meghan.

The Introduction to Drawing Professor asked students to document several assignments focusing on the basic elements outlined earlier using the same storage method, shared folders in Microsoft Teams, and standardized naming conventions. For their first digital submission, students in the course uploaded a test image, which our Paraprofessional took the time to review and provide feedback. Her impression was that students believed that if they did as she said and followed most of the technical instructions, they would get good images. While this was not the case, repeated assignments and feedback developed their critical eye, and submissions were much stronger in just a few weeks (Figure 6). In this way, visual literacy training was key to teaching students to understand the relationship between the original work of art and surrogate images.[8]

First Submission: 20230831_Kinsey_Test.heic

Paraprofessional's notes on the first submission
for Block 1 Intro to Drawing:

Image not converted to a jpeg (heic)
Not named correctly
Uneven lighting with shadow of the head of the person taking the photo visible
Image is not straight
Not cropped

Last Submission: AS103_2324_B1_360_Kinsey.jpeg

Figure 6: Comparison between a first and final submission of a student's documentation of projects in the Introduction to Drawing course.

[8] Amy Lazet, "Seeing Surrogacy: Digital Image Quality & Student Visual Literacy," *VRA Bulletin* 47, no. 1, article 2 (2020); Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL), *Companion Document to the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education: The Framework for Visual Literacy in Higher Education*, 2022, https://www.ala.org/sites/default/files/acrl/content//standards/Framework_Companion_Visual_Literacy.pdf.

Moving Forward

Following the initial pilot phase, we reflected on what worked. The shared space in Microsoft Teams allowed students access to their classmates' files so they could learn from each other what to do, and perhaps what not to do. It provided a level of transparency about the process and set expectations. We also found that making space for peer learning as a pedagogical approach translated easily into working with digital tools. Neither Kate nor Meghan entered the classroom as the expert, but rather a collaborator. Another success was moving the digital technology into the classroom, which placed it alongside older technology. In this space, students could tinker.

Figure 7: Students photographing their 3D work at a public documentation station during a photo demo.

While we outline many successes, there are challenges we feel important to address. One issue is the cost and maintenance of the equipment, especially with little turnaround time between block courses. Another is that not all that equipment lives within the Art Department. We borrowed the iPads from the Colorado College ITS; they are not always available to us.[9] The mobile scanning cart is heavily used, as is the VRC equipment, and the new photo documentation stations, which are public. We have already seen a rise in the use of the documentation stations as other classes adopt digitization projects (Figure 7). Furthermore, students not enrolled in studio classes, but who are still making work, come into department spaces to use the lights and backdrops. And finally, we found in the course we first tested in 2023, with our faculty colleague teaching Introduction to Drawing, that asking students to digitize their work, without integrating it fully into the course, led students to perceive the digital project as extra work and/or busy work. How the process is introduced became vital to its adaptation.

As of the writing of this article in the spring of 2025, Kate and Meghan, and the Art Department in which they work, no longer view the Personal Archive project as a pilot. This semester, almost all studio art courses at the 100- and 200-level, plus the 400-level senior seminar, have incorporated this training. Furthermore, our faculty visitors, here often for only one block, have included documentation and archiving in their classroom. We identify this ability of visitors to meet specific curricular expectations as a sign of success; we have made the process straightforward enough someone can come right into our department and teach it.[10]

[9] In most classes, we rely on student phones to document work. We still provide iPads on an as-needed basis for student who do not wish to use a personal device.

[10] We support visitors by providing documentation on how to use the photo stations, summarize best practices for managing digital files into their courses, and we build them a Teams folder. Meghan and other staff colleagues in the department are available to work with faculty and students in the classroom.

Now that the project has become a standard curricular expectation across the department, it has encouraged new pedagogical ideas about the role of archival research methodology in studio assignments. In an organic way, the technical process has led to specific stand-alone creative documentation projects in classes. For example, this semester Kate co-taught a course entitled Text and Texture with a faculty colleague in Comparative Literature. In that class, students explored the close reading of text and images with a specific focus on the field of narratology. Because the studio component of the course focused on two-dimensional design, Kate expanded the documentation expectations from the submission of individual images in class folders to include the design and layout of individual images in pdf portfolios for every assignment submission. In introducing the expectations for these pdf portfolios, one of Kate's students remarked "Oh, so you should kind of pretend you're an architect?" a comment that reflects a student's attempts to place the practice of archiving and documentation into methodologies in architecture and design. This project has the potential to expose students to the emerging field of Digital Humanities work and begin to understand their archive practice in relationship to a larger context. We hope to build additional project modules around the conceptual frameworks of archive work thinking.[11]

As an example, in the "Object as Artifact" assignment for the Text and Texture class, students designed 2-page pdf portfolios of their 3D Zine projects. Students' descriptive annotations also indicate they were making connections to documentation practices in social media. In one of the student's pdf portfolios, she labels her photographs as "Architect social media images" showing she is familiar in some way with this type of process shot (Figure 8). Moving forward, we hope to expand students' understanding of the expressive power of composing and presenting their documentation images. Specifically, we plan to introduce students to the concept of their creative work as "source making" with the knowledge that an artist's practice is a primary source of their lived experience.[12]

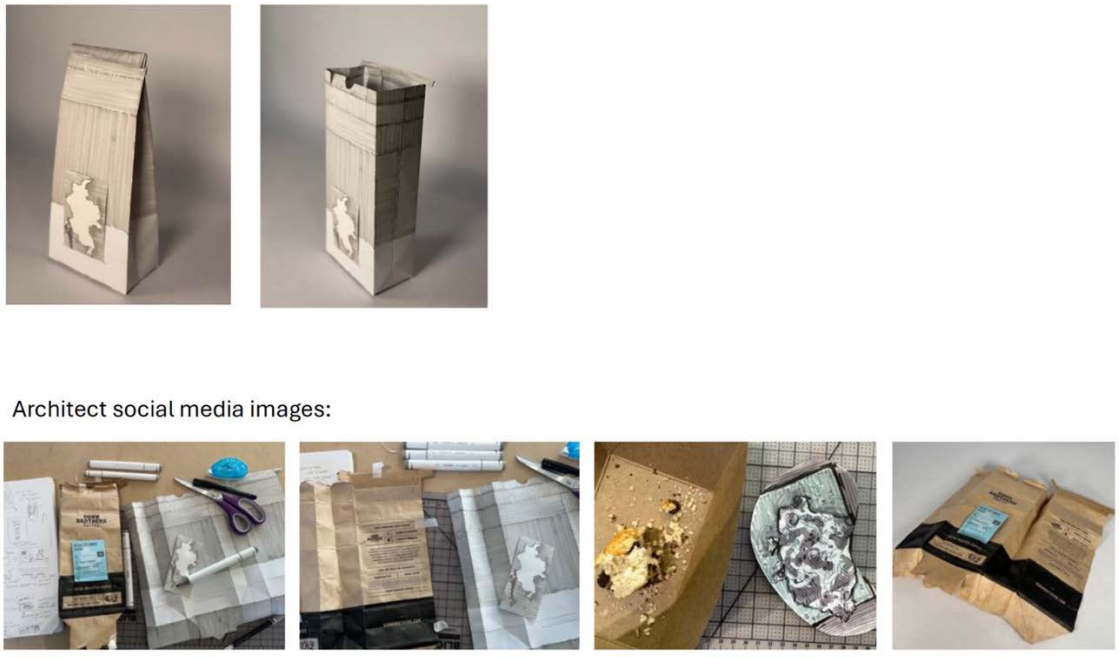

Figure 8: Student project of replica coffee bag at top with process shots below labeled "Architect social media images."

[11] Artwork Archive, "Disrupting the Archive and Why it Matters to History," *Artwork Archive*, April 12, 2021, https://www.artworkarchive.com/blog/disrupting-the-archive-and-why-it-matters-to-history.
[12] Artwork Archive.

Final Thoughts

One of the most rewarding parts of the Personal Archive project is its co-collaborative nature and its potential to shape future directions in our department. Art documentation is now an established foundation in the Art Studio curriculum and what we hope is a meaningful, and transferable, part of the student experience. This ongoing work continues to challenge and expand the way we think about art education in a liberal arts setting. We hope by sharing our process we encourage similar experimentation between other visual resources professionals and faculty.

Our fast-paced environment allows for quick iteration; we understand the timeline at other institutions may be protracted. However, one element key to the success of this project was positioning the Curator on the front line alongside faculty to co-create the curriculum. We thought of the process from the beginning as nimble, which allowed us to both bring ideas to the table and modify our goals in response to student outcomes. Each "failure" either gave us new ideas about how to provide instruction or, in exceptional cases, pushed us to expand our notion of what it means to teach documentation.

Students in this project are introduced to visual archives, digital photography, and file management. Through this process, they become engaged with the most common professional standards of the field and unknowingly begin to operate as meta-literate learners. Knowledge acquisition, knowledge production, and knowledge sharing are three observable and measurable competencies that emerge.[13] As such, the project has been particularly rewarding because our department has begun to associate digital literacy with critical thinking, thus making manifest the values of our liberal arts mission.

Our faculty colleagues seem eager to expand our department's knowledge and implementation of archiving best practices. We are beginning to move away from the assumption that documentation and archiving work is only a post-production tool. Rather, it has the potential to function as a trans-production mode of inquiry that could play a signature role in our program. As a practice that is both reflective and projective, it allows students to bring their "insights into the future."[14]

[13] Thomas P. Mackey and Trudi E. Jacobson, "Reframing Information Literacy as a Metaliteracy," *College & Research Libraries* 72, no. 1 (2011): 62–78.
[14] Artwork Archive.

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