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Developing a Practicum in Digital Collection Management

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Abstract

Engaging student workers in digitizing and cataloging image collections can be difficult yet through the development of a practicum course, as described in this case study, students find the work deeply rewarding, which in turn benefits the collection. The following pages will describe how to create a course that better prepares students for careers in the arts and design world by educating students about the role of collection management.

Keywords

digitization, student training, practicum, collection management

Author Bio & Acknowledgements

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To borrow the words of Bruno Latour, the French sociologist, we are operating in a field of action. In professions relating to visual resources, the types of roles we inhabit are shifting and many of us have adapted our work priorities to reflect the needs of our particular institutions and personal expertise. In fact, while members of VRA are involved in image work at one level or another I am struck during conversations at the conferences at how extremely different our day to day lives are. Yet one activity permeates through many of our varied workplace environments and objectives: a massive backlog of analog slides.

The digitization of slide collections is certainly a challenge many members of the VRA have contended with. After joining Colorado State University to direct its Visual Resource Center and Art Library, I put the Slide Archive (as it was being referred to when I arrived) on the back burner. Instead, I concentrated on establishing myself in a role that was desperately needed and one that suited my interests: a de facto embedded art librarian, with a full schedule of research consultations, information literacy sessions, and lectures. Yet, I knew that those 150,000 slides, some of them unique, weren't getting any closer to becoming an academic resource and I couldn't, in good faith, allow them to continue to collect dust or move them wholesale toward the dumpster. I knew that in order to develop them as a viable resource I would need to transfer the images to a digital database. For this task, I would need a committed student workforce. I wanted the development of this resource to be a process that was valuable to the student worker, to the university, and to the center I run. This case study presents how I used the transformation of digital images from analog slides to create something different from a traditional work-study or intern program. I will also cover the syllabus I've created, highlights from some of the projects the students have worked on, feedback from students, and my plans for the future of this course.

First, I'll explain the reason I wanted to develop this course. As a relatively recent graduate, the memories of donkeywork internships, entry-level jobs, and work-studies are deeply ingrained in my consciousness. Many of those experiences have taught me valued skill sets and furthered my professional education—there is certainly merit in repetitious work. Yet, I often felt like I was being brought in to do the mindless minutia that was too time consuming for fulltime staff. Moreover, I was sometimes brought into a collection project that had been ongoing for years and I didn't understand the context of what I was doing. It wasn't always clear to me why I was doing a task a certain way, what the intended outcome of the project was, what work had preceded my involvement, and what work would follow. I don't begrudge any of my past supervisors or employers a thing—they undoubtedly did their best with training and knew that hands-on work was a worthwhile means of teaching. They also surely had a lot of student employees or interns (with high turnover rates) and were constantly short of time themselves. I am sure if I had asked workflow or conceptual questions they would have gladly taken the time to answer my queries. Yet I was too insecure to reveal my ignorance and, most probably, I just didn't know which questions to ask.

So I knew when it came time to tackle the cataloging and digitizing of the Slide Archive, I wanted to do it differently, particularly because my workforce consists of undergraduate students without a background in collections. I wanted the students to be part of the discussion. I wanted them to understand the process and the workflow of a full-scale digitization project. Finally, I wanted them to grasp that the work they were

doing and the skills they were learning could lead them to careers after graduation. So I developed Digital Collection Management, a practicum course I continue to develop and adapt.

Using the CSU Slide Collection as a case study, my course seeks to introduce students to the principles of collection and information management. The cornerstone of museum and heritage work, the role of collection management has only expanded during the digital age. The objective of this internship is to provide students with professional skills that will help prepare them for future careers in the art and design world. Upon completion of the course the hope is students will be familiar with:
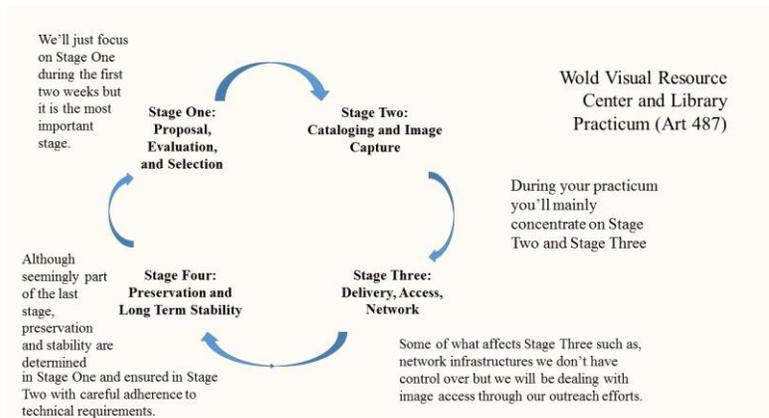
-the role of collection and information management within the art world
-the need for evaluation, community studies, and management of user expectations
-concepts of budget, planning, and workflow management
-the creation of collection development policies (statement of purpose, definition and scope, deaccessioning and disposal, copyright policies, local cataloging standards, etc.)
-cataloging and digitization procedures
-digital outreach and curation

Over the course of the practicum, students will only begin to touch on these objectives but it's a start.

Before students may enroll or begin work at the center, they need to know what they are becoming involved with. Within my syllabus, I lay out exactly what students should expect and what the expectations are for the work they produce. I explain that they'll be doing cataloging, digitizing, and blogging during their shifts at the center. They'll also be expected to contribute to working policy documents regarding standards for processing the collection. I tell them about the interviews and let them know they'll be expected to finish readings and research relating to the field of the interviewee. Prior to each interview, students are expected to prepare at least three interview questions and email them to me by five pm the evening before the interview. Students are also expected to write a very short paper responding to their experience detailing the skills they've learned, how the internship met their expectations, and recommendations for how to improve the course for future interns.

In the beginning of the term, the class meets more frequently as a group so that students understand the groundwork and feel part of a community. I should mention that group meetings, as well as tours, last for only about an hour once a week. I did this to ensure easy scheduling. After the first week, students are expected to come in individually to do digitizing and cataloging work. Yet, they seem to benefit from early group meetings where they can learn about issues from me, do set readings, and also voice their questions to the group. Students' questions are often similar so answering queries in a group saves time. Also, some students seem not to have any questions at all. However, just hearing the thoughts that their peers are having often helps them tackle issues of digital collection management more deeply.

The first week of the course is a general introduction. I walk through the collection and their tasks with the group. Especially important is our workflow and project planning.

We'll just focus on Stage One during the first two weeks but it is the most important stage.

Stage One: Proposal, Evaluation, and Selection

Stage Two: Cataloging and Image Capture

Wold Visual Resource Center and Library Practicum (Art 487)

During your practicum you'll mainly concentrate on Stage Two and Stage Three

Although seemingly part of the last stage, preservation and stability are determined in Stage One and ensured in Stage Two with careful adherence to technical requirements.

Stage Four: Preservation and Long Term Stability

Stage Three: Delivery, Access, Network

Some of what affects Stage Three such as, network infrastructures we don't have control over but we will be dealing with image access through our outreach efforts.

Figure 1 A workflow handout I share with students during their first week

I am in the academic business so I believe in the business of begging, borrowing, and blatantly stealing. I've found it useful to have students work through Cornell's tutorial. This online tool (https://www.library.cornell.edu/preservation/tutorial/contents.html) helps students understand the context of their work. I also think that the above workflow handout reminds them that collection management is not a linear process. One element that is discussed during this time is policy writing. Encouraging students to tackle policy writing is not only good for their resume and individual writing practice, but also prepares students for group drafting and peer editing, an experience that will serve them well whether or not they go into a collection management related career.

During the second meeting, we talk about the history of slide collections and the role of art images in teaching art history. I added this session as a direct response to the feedback I got from one student during my first semester that asked to learn more about how the collection came about. Many of today's students have never seen slides used as teaching aids. They don't see the connection between PowerPoint and the Slide Archive (despite PowerPoint's use of analog taxonomy). They don't know the slides' context, or how the slide collection was built. This session was my most traditional lecture course of all our meetings but the students seemed truly intrigued. I began talking about early modern etching, moving on to plaster cast study, and then the role of photography in teaching art.

Figure 2 Students looking at glass lantern slides (photograph by author)

I passed around tintypes, daguerreotypes, and glass lantern slides. The glass lantern slides mesmerized the students. The latex gloves that students are wearing in the photo are not really necessary but I've found students feel particularly special when you have them put on gloves. Finally, this session emphasized the longevity of slides throughout generations of art history education. The students were amazed to learn that Ektachrome was introduced in 1940s and only discontinued in its various forms from 2009 to 2011. I also brought out materials for making slide mounts and have them take apart a slide to better understand what a slide is. This may seem obvious but most of these students have never dealt with analog film at all.

In the third week of the course we discuss

copyright. I've found that today students are extremely anxious about copyright and how to exhibit images digitally. So we break down the rules concerning fair use and public domain. The first semester I taught this course I had yet to decide on a database and the website was not developed. The students from that first semester took part in meetings with the web developer. They worked on mockups and tested content management systems. Through this work they understood the connection between eventual display, project planning and cataloging. How will users search for and use an image? The students understood, as a result of these meetings, that these are questions that dictate decisions concerning cataloging and digitization.

While we are years away from have a searchable image collection, students have begun to think about issues surrounding digital curation because of their activity on the center's website. Students have a lot of freedom here to write about local events, exhibitions, collections, and individual art images or groups of images from the archive. I emphasize to students when I first go through the syllabus that these blog entries should be professional in nature. Later, they may want to share their entries with employers. This being said, students have a lot of fun playing 'detective.' When I was in similar roles to my students, I would sometimes find myself investing energy trying to track down an image or an individual. This is natural and indicative of the inborn curiosity that we want to foster in students and budding professionals. We need to try to channel our students' interest into something productive that can be shared rather than something the students feel any guilt about indulging.

In the middle part of the semester we focus on professional interviews. This is my favorite part of the semester, as it was for most of my students. Typically, I do about five interviews each semester – a mix of Skype interviews, face-to-face visits and tours given to university staff in related fields. In Spring 2013, the first semester I taught the practicum, for instance, I set up interviews with the following people:

- Suzanne Hale, Collection Manager at CSU University Art Museum
- Chris Hall, Curator at Maine Maritime Museum
- Adrianna Del Collo, Archivist at the Metropolitan Museum of Art
- Nicole Santiago, Project Chart Recipient and Public Programs Assistant at NYPL
- Megan Osborne, Collection Manager Avenir Museum of Design & Merchandising at CSU

The next semester we meet with Alex Grogan from Sotherby's, Janet Bishop from CSU's archives and special collections, Leila Sternman, Scholarly Communication Librarian at Montana State University, Beth Oehlerts, Associate Professor and Metadata Librarian, and Emily McGoldrick, Collections Management Assistant at the Costume Institute in the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Figure 3 Students speaking via Skype to Alex Grogan (photograph by author)

Before each interview, I assign readings regarding the field of the interviewee yet, unsurprisingly; it's the interview itself that broadens their horizons. For instance, before speaking with Alex

Grogan, Assistant Vice President and Sales Director for African and Oceanic Art at Sotherby's, students knew little, if anything, about the commercial art market. Moreover, many students at our university have never been to New York or any large city, other than Denver, and simply hearing the horns of taxis over laptop speakers inspired them to imagine opportunities and careers beyond the Front Range.

The local tours had more immediate impact. In the picture below, Janet Bishop, Coordinator for Archives and Special Collections at CSU is showing students some highlights from the collection. Students are often mesmerized by the archives and

Figure 4 Janet Bishop and students (photograph by the author)

stay after the tour to speak with Janet and her colleagues. I've had students find work after the practicum at the archives and other repositories. Having experienced meeting and talking to professionals, students better recognize this community as a resource that wants to help them and it broadens their sense of careers related to art. I want to underscore that these interviews and visit are also extremely useful to me on multiple fronts. For one, the Skype interviews keep me in communication with associated professionals throughout the country and the local tours often support collaborations within my university.

Finally, something that I've found essential for this practicum is feedback. My first semester, I asked students about their suggestions for the future of the project. I received some valuable responses:

—I wish there was more than one day spent on the law aspect of digital art images. I feel that most art students aren't well versed in media and usage
—I did learn a ton that will help me in my future aspirations for jobs…I have found a deep interest in wanting to work in a field that preserves materials…
—Overall, the class was a great way to learn broadly the issues that surround and practices that are involved in digital collections management process…it was of great value to me personally as I do wish to go into this area as a career and eventually practice professionally.

Looking to the future, I hope to change some elements of the course after taking a hiatus from teaching it. When I return to teaching the practicum, I might have students do an initial paper or written reflection about key terms and concepts. I would like to have a structured response paper midway through the term so we can reflect about cataloging work as a group. I will also expect students to peer review each other's work.

Finally, and this is the main reason I've taken a break from teaching the course, I want to change it into a yearlong, two-part practicum. In the future, I would broaden and deepen the lectures I give, and broaden the structured interviews to an entire semester

with the following semester being reserved for individual collection processing. Although this practicum has allowed me to train students as a group, it still remains a lot of work for me to guide students through the syllabus and interviews only to see them finish out the semester. Yet even during the short duration of a semester, students who take this practicum are more engaged and thoughtful in the work they do than with typical work-study students. They no longer see this as a mere get-credit opportunity, they see their time in the 'Slide Archive' as an opportunity to gain skills, further expertise, deepen their awareness, and prepare for a career in an area they are passionate about.