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## Exhibits as Instruction: Integrating Educational Content into Academic Library Displays

Brooke Gross, University of Mississippi

In an era of staff shortages and budget cuts across the board, librarians are being asked to wear many different hats in order to successfully complete their job functions. For academic librarians at research institutions, this may include serving as subject liaison to multiple different departments while also contributing to first-year instruction and pursuing service or research projects of their own. Librarians have to be adaptable, flexible, and efficient on a daily basis. It stands to reason, then, that their resources and teaching materials should also wear multiple hats. While most academic librarians develop consistent instruction routines and tools over time, such as research guides, exhibits represent a part of the library and librarianship as a profession that is not always fully taken advantage of. Library displays have always been fun ways to show off collections and promote events or services, but they can also serve as supplements for library instruction.

Academic librarians should strive to expand their reach as instructors by making library exhibits informative and interactive, not just interesting or unique. They can do this by integrating educational content into the display that is relevant to classes or proficiencies being taught in the university, particularly by the library. Developing displays that cover core competencies or research skills with designated learning objectives can enhance student learning, increase foot traffic, and provide a shared resource for both librarian and instructor reference. In order to pursue these types of educational exhibits in a university environment, academic librarians must understand what is needed to make them successful and how to address challenges that are likely to pop up throughout the process.

### Developing Instructional Exhibits

There are three fundamental requirements for developing efficient and effective instructional exhibits: collaboration, adaptability, and effective use of appropriate technology. Whether the display area is small & off the beaten path or multiple cases in the middle of the library, factoring in these elements during the initial planning and development phase will ensure that the exhibit can function as a supportive teaching tool for a variety of audiences.

#### **Collaboration**

First, librarians should look for opportunities to collaborate with other departments, both within and outside the library, when putting together an instructional exhibit. For example, the author recently created an exhibit focused on evaluating credibility and identifying fake news by collaborating with the Political Papers Archivist to

establish historical context by incorporating scans of documents from the 1960s demonstrating public concern with mass media. This type of collaboration will serve multiple purposes. Pulling in diverse perspectives and professional strengths benefits the librarian in charge of the display by providing networking opportunities that could lead to more collaborative projects, such as research articles or other exhibits. Building relationships with instructors in particular allows librarians to market themselves and their services directly, meaning they can potentially reach more students and increase library use overall, because instructors have influence over their students' assignments and study habits. Having collaborators from a variety of different backgrounds can also strengthen the exhibit's scope and scale, simply by virtue of how many hands can help put it together and how many minds can contribute to its content. For example, establishing more versatile content that appeals to patrons in different fields can make the display more viable as a teaching tool, and that is achieved by involving contributors with different expertise. Additionally, ensuring that multiple people are available to create and assemble the exhibit components can make the physical aspects of display-building go more smoothly. This will require patience and flexibility on the librarian's part. People may want to be helpful, for example, but have limited time to do so. In these cases—as long as the exhibit schedule is not compromised—it is important to accommodate those willing to contribute and take help whenever possible, rather than trying to complete everything singlehandedly. This is part of developing a healthy collaborative environment. Finally, the level of promotion an exhibit receives can be expanded by having multiple workers or departments invested in its success.

Of course, collaboration often comes with complications. Though the physical process of creating and installing display materials becomes easier with each additional set of hands, concept development and decision-making become more difficult. This issue can be addressed by first determining how detailed, complex, or multifaceted an exhibit should be from the beginning. For single-case exhibits focused on one particular topic, librarians who already have an overall vision can reach out to colleagues for assistance with supplementary materials or predetermined display components. This may include special collections items or audiovisual supplements, for example, which would be provided by other contributors but directed by the librarian. For larger exhibits, or in instances where the focus is meant to fall on multiple different departments or collections equally, librarians must be prepared to involve collaborators from the earliest stages of planning. This will demand more meetings and more preparation up front, to account for a longer deci-

sion-making process, but should result in a more cohesive display that is promoted and supported through multiple avenues. The librarian can still be the point person for the exhibit, but enough power and independence should be given to each contributor to avoid excess pressure or responsibility falling on any single individual. If more than one department is meant to be represented, those collaborators should feel appropriately heard and involved.

### **Adaptability**

Second, a library display doubling as an instructional supplement should be adaptable, and able to address the needs of as many different students as possible. To achieve this, librarians should start with an exhibit that covers a broad concept or learning objective, then encourage classes with relevant subject matter to utilize the display as part of their curriculum. This method gives librarians the potential to reach a greater number of students with less continuous effort throughout the semester. For instance, the author's fake news exhibit was initially designed to supplement a Fundamentals of Active Learning course at the University of Mississippi, but was adapted for larger audiences after receiving compliments from instructors and colleagues about the widespread relevance of the content.

Exhibits built around general content or widely applicable skills—such as critical thinking or media literacy—can be marketed as additional teaching tools for any number of classes and used in different ways. One potential use would be incorporating display content into a research guide, which could then serve as a supplementary resource with additional information or activities not included in the exhibit. A display featuring photographs, for example, might direct students to a guide with links to digital image collections. Librarians could make simpler use of an educational exhibit merely by referring to it during instruction sessions, as a touchpoint for students who are only briefly exposed to the content. For example, a librarian might give a quick overview of the Library of Congress call number system in class, but then refer students to an exhibit that explains those classifications in more detail. Finally, a display focused on a universal theme or broad skill may be broken down into smaller pieces for use, allowing students to narrow in on one or two learning objectives even if the display technically covers more. An example of this might be an exhibit designed to promote library services and resources that includes directions to physical study spaces as well as online chat hours. A librarian giving an instruction session to a class that only meets on campus once a week could specifically draw students' attention to the online chat hours, since that information would be most useful to them. Developing adaptable instructional exhibits means a librarian could teach different classes with different themes or required skills, but be able to point them all to the same exhibit. The display can be as versatile as the people who create it.

This method can take some pressure off of librarians, particularly those who do a lot of first-year instruction sessions for classes that have similar but slightly different learning objectives. As library roles and technologies change, librarians are often tasked with teaching both old and new skills to incoming students with a variety of different information needs. Additionally, because they can never be sure that students will return to the library for more in-depth research assistance, they have to cram as much information and engagement into their sessions as possible. They must arm students with the base-level skills they need, which seem to increase in number and complexity every year, while also establishing a welcoming environment that encourages future visits. This is a very fine line to walk. If they take time to answer individual questions or go through confidence-building activities, such as sample searches, librarians inevitably sacrifice content that could have been critical to the students' college experience. Contrarily, if librarians simply race through as much content as possible without pausing for feedback or processing, students might not retain the information at all. This could lead them to tune out the librarian altogether, or prevent them from asking questions. This concern is currently being addressed through the use of research guides, handouts, and individual consultations. While these materials and services are invaluable, an educational exhibit featuring similar content can allow students to access the same information in a more interesting way on their own time, rather than trying to find limited time and mental energy to ask for extra help. Additionally, an informative exhibit featuring content that is always relevant for a variety of audiences gives any librarian a reference tool that can be used across multiple semesters or even academic years.

### **Effective Use of Appropriate Technology**

Lastly, an exhibit that seeks to educate modern audiences should make adequate use of appropriate modern technology. This could be as simple as putting display photos up on the university and library websites, using QR codes to link to other digital collections, or making sure related research guides are mobile-friendly. Libraries that frequently utilize more advanced technology might even consider incorporating augmented and virtual reality components, big data, or custom audiovisual materials to create a more specialized display. For example, at a nearby institution, the author worked with some Holmes Community College campus libraries where they have a zSpace board that can be used for virtual reality anatomy and dissection demonstrations, but could also serve as a centerpiece for an exhibit showcasing medical materials. In another example, when special collections librarians and workers from the University of Tennessee collaborated with the English and Theatre departments to develop an exhibit called *Page to Stage: The Art of Theatre* in 2020, they used an interactive touch screen to supplement the display cases with digital collections as well as created a virtual tour. The technology itself does not neces-

sarily matter. The point is to keep up with whatever technology trends the university is already following and enhance the exhibit accordingly. This can make the display more engaging, fun, and relevant for tech-savvy audiences. It can give the librarian more opportunities for inter-departmental collaboration, as well as demonstrate the library's commitment to embracing a wide range of tools and resources. Finally, having technological components can lengthen the lifespan of an especially important or meaningful exhibit through digital preservation. In the case of the author's fake news display, the author took photographs of it to incorporate into an online exhibit guide, which included background information and links to all relevant materials; these will be preserved digitally in the University of Mississippi's institutional repository.

### Challenges of Instructional Exhibits

There are a few significant challenges when it comes to integrative instructional exhibit planning that must be addressed. The most obvious are time and effort. Because displays or exhibits are not as heavily weighted in the tenure and promotion process, new librarians will likely want to do something interesting and useful, but may hesitate to sacrifice too many precious research hours. The activity fills a gap in librarianship as a whole, but provides little to no added professional reward. On the other hand, tenured librarians might be inspired to take on more complex or niche exhibits that fit their research areas or personal interests, but those topics may not be relevant to other campus audiences. In either case, developing an attractive exhibit that doubles as an effective teaching tool requires an additional level of work and planning that can be daunting. For tenure-track librarians, it involves dedicating a significant number of hours to conceptualizing and coordinating display elements cohesively while also juggling other job requirements. For non-tenure-track or tenured librarians with a preexisting vision, it involves seeking out dedicated audiences and potentially altering concepts to meet external needs. Creating exhibits that serve as teaching tools has to go beyond putting up cool stuff or advertising library events, though, which means the time and effort that goes into their development must go beyond finding unique items or resizing premade posters. This makes the process more demanding, but also more rewarding and impactful in the long run.

Fortunately, collaboration and the academic calendar offer some opportunities for overcoming the additional time and effort demanded by educational exhibits. Especially for larger library displays, having multiple helping hands can more evenly distribute some of the physical workload, as previously mentioned. Natural breaks in scheduling also provide some wiggle room when it comes to pulling display items together. The empty weeks between semesters are perfect for assembly. Students are gone, which allows librarians and other contributors to take their time constructing physical display ele-

ments without having to worry about blocked hallways or unfinished pieces. Rome was not built in a day; integrative and engaging exhibits do not have to be either. These periods of inactivity within the university are traditionally used for research and instruction planning, but this kind of exhibit planning requires an array of mental and physical activities that can help balance the tedium of academic writing. Lastly, because the goal is to enhance instruction, putting more work into these kinds of displays on the ground level can serve as a form of instruction development. Thinking about exhibits in a new way, as puzzle pieces meant to fit within the big picture of teaching, may even inspire new instructional design innovation.

### Making Instructional Exhibits Sustainable

A key factor that must be considered in every phase of planning and executing instructional library exhibits is sustainability. A multi-use display that serves as a campus-wide crowd-pleaser and dedicated teaching tool cannot be considered successful simply because it met those criteria for one semester or academic year. This is especially true for exhibits designed to supplement first-year instruction or general education classes. These courses are often the same year after year, allowing instructors to reuse assignments and teach content consistently. Introducing new library resources into these environments is tricky to begin with, because many instructors have routines that are already developed and tested. Promoting an interactive exhibit designed to revolutionize and enhance student learning with the caveat that it is only temporary would be an even more difficult situation to navigate. Therefore, librarians must find a way to make these displays sustainable, preserving both visual aesthetics and content, in order to maintain relevance for as long as possible. For many universities, the solution to this problem will be developing digital materials in conjunction with the physical exhibit components, to be stored in an institutional repository or other stable online platform. Only then can librarians ensure that the exhibit content remains accessible to patrons even after the physical display has been taken down.

### Conclusion

Developing a library exhibit that fully integrates educational content and serves as an engaging teaching tool may seem like a daunting task, but the potential rewards are worth the added time and effort. Academic librarians that can put in the collaboration, adaptation, and technology efforts necessary for implementing and sustaining these displays will see enhanced instruction that reaches a greater number of students and meets the needs of more diverse audiences.