

Of pedagogy and potentiality: Embodied learning and collaborative storytelling through pop-up exhibits

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Abstract: As academic librarians' teaching evolves in response to and in anticipation of our communities' needs, we must think broadly and intentionally about the tools and strategies we use to facilitate inclusive, collaborative instruction experiences.

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Today's academic librarians are reshaping our roles as teachers who support students in navigating the contexts and structures that govern information. Library instruction has become increasingly interdisciplinary, creative, and collaborative, utilizing elements of feminist pedagogy and Universal Design for Learning to facilitate inclusive and just educational experiences. Pop-up exhibits, which I define as temporary assemblages of materials, are a promising opportunity for this kind of engagement.

Pop-up exhibits emerged in library special collections as a mode of participatory outreach and instruction: visitors are able to ask questions and engage in hands-on interactions with items as they are introduced to the services of the special collections library. Often lacking the formality and extensive public relations efforts of their more permanent counterparts, pop-up exhibits may simply look like a handful of materials laid out on a small table, with someone on hand to answer questions for a couple of hours. These exhibits may or may not have a predetermined theme, virtual components, handouts, activities, or library promotional materials. An institution's available staff time, space, and resources may change the particulars of pop-up exhibits, but, generally, these exhibits are an adaptable medium centered on the act of placing library materials and instruction outside of a formal classroom setting.

Part of the novelty and accessibility of pop-up exhibits as outreach lies in meeting library users where they are already physically located. It is important to note, however, that these exhibits can also be utilized as a pedagogical tool in the context of course-based assignments, wherein students assemble and display artifacts of their own choosing. By encouraging students to engage directly in curating an exhibit, making decisions about what to display and why, and communicating these

decisions to larger audiences, we provide opportunities for metacognition and a deeper understanding of curatorial and archival concepts.

As such, pop-up exhibits can change the landscape of library engagement by offering alternate exhibit formats and providing means to “experiment with or activate the discourse around the curatorial itself” (Springer, 2016, p. 131). Pop-up exhibits facilitate a form of collaborative storytelling in which meaning is constructed as a product of interaction between the library worker, library visitor, and materials on display. The experience may be spontaneous or serendipitous; no registration or request forms are necessary and exhibit materials are (ideally) brought to high-traffic campus spaces. Visitors can view the entire exhibit without needing to move. They can identify relationships and find order outside of typical categorization and arrangement (i.e., chronology, format, genre, etc.). They can, for example, participate in the curatorial by leaving pages turned to sections they find compelling, expanding the context of the exhibit to include social media commentary, and conversing with the curator; these interactions may even change the curator’s own understanding of the items on display. This intervention is significant: library visitor and library worker are positioned as interlocutors and collaborators, unsettling normative conceptions of librarian-as-expert, exhibits-as-inaccessible, and libraries-as-unapproachable. As Maria Accardi notes, “feminist pedagogy seeks to transform the teacher/student relationship and disrupt traditional notions of classroom power and authority” (2013, p. 42). The spirit of the pop-up exhibit recognizes the authority and experiential knowledge each visitor brings to the table.

Another component of feminist pedagogical practice is emphasizing “hands-on or interactive learning” (Accardi, 2013, p. 50). Such instruction aligns with Dolmage’s main components of Universal Design for Learning: “multiple means of representation,” “multiple means of expression,” and

“multiple means of engagement” (2015, n.p.). Librarians and archivists have identified ways to integrate Universal Design principles into exhibits and educational materials (e.g. Lacher-Feldman, 2013, p. 69-70). A proactive, inclusive, and compassionate instruction practice builds on this work and uses embodied learning as an anti-oppressive pedagogical strategy.

At their core, feminist and anti-oppressive pedagogies are about addressing the ways in which institutions and societal structures are sites of marginalization, subjugation, and power imbalance. Wagner and Shahjahan draw explicit attention to the situatedness of higher education amidst a climate of neoliberalism. They describe embodied learning as “an epistemological and pedagogic shift” that recognizes “bodies as agents of knowledge production” and challenges the normative construction of knowledge as isolated within the mind, separate from the body (2015, p. 245).

Disability studies scholars have been vital architects of frameworks for understanding the integrative relationship between body, mind, and self. Petra Kuppers’ conceptualization of *enmindedness*, or the experience of inhabiting one’s body and mind as a combined entity, has been particularly influential in my own learning and teaching: “We do not have a mind and a body: we are a bodymind. And there are many different states of enmindedness too, not just one ‘right’ way” (2014, p. 44). Rethinking embodiment, enmindment, and sensory experience in a library instruction context necessarily involves rethinking what and how we are teaching. As a form of primary source instruction, pop-up exhibits can be used as a practical method for supporting enminded and embodied learning.

Special collections librarians’ use of primary source instruction has laid the groundwork for this type of holistic, multisensory engagement in libraries (see Bahde, Smedberg, and Taormina (Eds.) 2014). Take, for example, a basic briefing on the safe handling of archival materials: when we explain that bare hands can sense brittle paper or fragile documents better than gloved hands, and when we

say things like “move slowly and gently,” we are implicitly saying that the foundation of a successful session is mindfulness of, and attentiveness to, the relationship between bodymind and object. It is atypical for instructors/facilitators to encourage learners to trust their instincts and regularly check in with their senses and emotions. I suggest we do this upfront and often in order to increase transparency and equitable power dynamics.

Asking students to think deeply about materiality, emotional response, and context is a practice of reflective learning that can and should be adapted outside of special collections environments. As our teaching evolves in response to, and in anticipation of, our communities’ needs, librarians must think critically and intentionally about the tools and strategies we use, expanding the range of sources from which we seek guidance and inspiration.

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