

Curating the Learning in the Visual Arts – The Academic and Library Partnership

Kerri Klumpp
Research Information Service
The University of Queensland Library

Abstract

Curating in the Visual Arts is a course at the University of Queensland that shows the value of 21st century educational skills in the research and practice of art curatorship. It also utilises multiple learning sites across the campus: The University of Queensland Art Museum, The Digital Humanities Laboratory in the School of English, Media Studies & Art History as well as UQ Library spaces.

The key works of art underpinning the assessment for the course are held in the UQ Art Museum. Students research these works both in the Museum and the Library. This research is compiled into catalogue essays as well as entries for the AustLit database. Students also develop visual and digital skills to curate virtual exhibitions using Ortelia Curator™ software.

This paper aims to show the ways in which the UQ Library supports *Curating in the Visual Arts* students in the use of archival and digital resources as they work across different learning spaces - physical and virtual, within the Library, UQ Art Museum and Digital Humanities Laboratory.

This paper presents a case study of 21st century educational skills by profiling an Art History course, *Curating in the Visual Arts* at The University of Queensland. Through analysis of the course assessment and learning outcomes, it will consider the range of literacies and competencies developed by students. The paper will also focus on how the Library supports students in the discovery and use of archival and digital resources as they work across different spaces – physical and virtual. How Librarians engage with students, beyond the Library building, in external and online environments.

Curating in the Visual Arts is a third year course offered by the School of English, Media Studies & Art History, within the Faculty of Humanities & Social Sciences. It is a capstone course and is therefore compulsory for an Art History major. It is also available to post graduate students undertaking an MA in Museum Studies.

The course profile provides a picture of the theoretical and practical components that comprise *Curating in the Visual Arts*:

“This course introduces students to the theoretical principles and debates regarding art curatorship in the twenty-first century. It provides an overview of the visual arts industry in Australia from cultural policy to the inception of an exhibition concept. Guest lectures, seminars, field visits and online learning activities develop knowledge and skills from designing an exhibition layout to writing exhibition proposals, didactics and catalogue essays” (ARTT3117 Course Profile).

The *Curating in the Visual Arts* students experience different physical learning environments across campus: The UQ Art Museum, The Digital Humanities Laboratory, Lecture and Library spaces. As students work across different spaces, using different research methods, technologies and tools, they

produce work within a shifting and dynamic learning environment. Students also complete an industry placement as part of the course, which brings a practical context to their curating studies.

In its different approaches, the course reflects 21st century skills, defined by education academic Elena Silva (630) as having “an emphasis on what students can do with knowledge rather than what units of knowledge they have.” She goes on to say “Today’s workers in nearly all sectors of the economy must be able to find and analyse information, often coming from multiple sources, and use this information to make decisions and create new ideas.” (631) Silva also states that 21st century skills are not necessarily new, but newly important (631). Maintaining the capacity to think critically, analytically and innovatively is not unique to the 21st century. However, in the current technological, social and economic conditions, these skills have become more significant.

In his book *Too Big to Know: Rethinking Knowledge Now That the Facts Aren’t the Facts, Experts are Everywhere and the Smartest Person in the Room is the Room*, David Weinberger describes our current crisis of information overload as a cultural condition (9). That within our networked knowledge we have replaced the previous physical filters of library collection committees (and editors of books or newspapers) with algorithmic and social Internet filters or a combination of both (9). The former uses the processing power of computers; the latter uses the network of online personal or professional communities. Weinberger also notes that information overload is not new, dating back to Alvin Toffler in 1970¹ and in the comments of Roman philosopher, Seneca before this².

Weinberger also points to the boundlessness of the Internet. The World Wide Web doesn’t exist within a finite space or have ‘edges’ within which to contain knowledge, such as a Library building or a daily newspaper. “No edges mean no shape. And no shape means that networked knowledge lacks what we have long taken to be essential to the structure of knowledge: a foundation” (17).

It is against this cultural, social, and indeed academic, backdrop that students are faced with locating scholarly information, which becomes knowledge, to be applied to a given context with a creative or innovative outcome.

Four pieces of assessment are set for the course:

- A written exhibition catalogue essay
- A written artists’ resource file entry into a database
- An industry placement and associated project work; and
- A curated virtual exhibition using software

These assessment tasks not only incorporate 21st century skills, but also combine traditional information literacy with digital and visual literacy. Information literacy is defined by the Association of College and Research Libraries as the capacity to “recognise when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate and use effectively the needed information” (The University of Queensland Library, Information Literacy Framework). The University of Queensland’s Information Literacy Framework is based on the Australian and New Zealand Information Literacy Framework:

¹ Weinberger credits Toffler’s 1970 book *Future Shock* as the first public introduction to the concept of information overload, p.5

² Weinberger quotes Seneca “What is the point of having countless books and libraries whose title the owner could scarcely read through in his whole lifetime? That mass of books burdens the student without instructing.”, p.8.

principles, standards and practice (The University of Queensland Library, Information Literacy Framework).

Digital literacy at its most basic definition is the ability to perform information literacy tasks in a digital environment (Da Costa 35). JISC, an organisation that promotes the use of technology in education and research within the United Kingdom, has elaborated on its intentionally broad definition of digital literacy, developing a seven elements model (Developing Digital Literacies). This model establishes a set of academic or professional behaviours that form part of digital literacy:

- Information Literacy
- Media Literacy
- Communication and collaboration
- Career and identity management
- ICT literacy
- Learning Skills
- Digital Scholarship

Curating in the Visual Arts students navigate through these various literacies, developing intellectual, technological and predominantly visual skill sets. Students analyse artworks as individual pieces and as part of a larger exhibition or project. They research the artwork and artists' histories through archives, library resources, gallery websites and portals. Students develop their own curatorial essays, upload online artist entries and participate in industry placements. The artist online entry demonstrates visual analysis skills and highlights the significance of a work in the oeuvre of the artist. The catalogue essay draws out conceptual and theoretical ties between selected artists and their artistic production. The virtual exhibition considers aesthetic connections and spatial relationships between selected works. The industry placement facilitates the development of professional team-based skills and awareness of workplace protocols.

UQ Art Museum

The UQ Art Museum has a long history of being a learning site for curatorial students. Associate Professor Nancy Underhill, the first director of the Art Museum and head of the Department of Fine Arts (as it was then called), was "passionate about encouraging her students to use the museum as a 'laboratory', enabling them to learn a range of curatorial skills" (The University of Queensland Art Museum, "Our History").

The University of Queensland Art Museum's collection holds over 3,000 artworks and is Queensland's second largest public art collection (UQ Art Museum, "About the Collection"). The collection comprises of works by major Australian artists from the colonial period to the present. Since 2004, the University has established the National Collection of Artists' Self Portraits, which forms an important focus area for collecting (The University of Queensland Art Museum, "About the Collection").

With this collection strength and its educational support, the UQ Art Museum provides an invaluable space for students. The Museum provides firsthand experience of the dynamics of curating contemporary and historical artworks - from designing the layout of the exhibition to writing catalogue publications. The first lecture for the course is held in the UQ Art Museum, providing a

practical context for studying art curating. Students receive an introductory talk and welcome from the Museum Staff and a tour behind the scenes of the latest exhibition.

The main piece of writing for the course, a catalogue essay, is based on featured artists and works from the Art Museum's collection. In 2,500 words, students are required to provide an exhibition concept that contextualises a featured artist and work, as well as at least four other of their works (ARTT3117 Course Profile). Students view the artworks online via the UQ Art Museum collection pages or in the exhibition space itself, where works are on display. Students make return visits to view the works in the space and context of the exhibition or the online profile of the work.

AustLit

The AustLit assessment task takes students from the physical experience of the art museum into the digital, online realm. Students are required to research, compile and enter data on a specific artist into AustLit (ARTT3117 Course Profile).

AustLit is a subscription database, providing access to scholarly sources of Australian culture. Its mission is "to be the definitive information resource and research environment for Australian literary, print, and narrative cultures" (About AustLit). It is primarily concerned with Australian literature, however, its scope also extends to include other genres such as film, theatre and art. It includes biographical, bibliographical and critical information about Australian culture and its producers (About AustLit). It is led by The University of Queensland, which is also one of the co-creators of the database. The course co-ordinator saw this UQ affiliation as an opportunity for students to contribute scholarly research and therefore approached the director of AustLit (Holland).

Students' research builds on AustLit's important collection of Australian cultural content. The AustLit artist file is a shorter written piece, providing an overview of artists' works. By creating a database entry, students also gain further understanding of the structure of a database and how metadata contributes to search and discovery of information contained within various fields; the relationship between inputs and outputs of data sets.

For example, a student entry on Sandra Selig's work, *Universes (71)*, 2007, includes metadata as well as a description of the work itself. The title, date, medium, technique and provenance are all included. The work is also considered in relation to other, similar works created by the artist in the time period of 2006-2007.

Library Research Support

Apart from visual analysis, it is research that underpins the written assessments: the catalogue essay and AustLit artist entry. Students identify scholarly sources to draw upon for their own writing as well as academic frames of reference for online content such as newspaper reviews and gallery publications. Upon successful completion of the course, students should be able to "Conduct scholarly well focused research for visual arts writing and [demonstrate an] ability to communicate curatorial trends and perspectives in written forms, such as exhibition catalogues and online databases" (ARTT3117 Course Profile).

To help develop students research skills, the Library provides research support in person and online. The opportunity to deliver information literacy presentations as part of the lecture, outside of the library, is considered valuable by Librarians and the course co-ordinator alike. Integrating research

and information literacy components within the lecture gives these practices more relevance to students' learning. As numbers of students approaching reference desks in the Library are declining (see Fig. 1), these presentations provide an alternative way of reaching students in their lecture space. As DaCosta observes "Today's students are less likely to learn their information literacy skills at the enquiry desk or a voluntary workshop, since they are less inclined to think that they need help" (40).

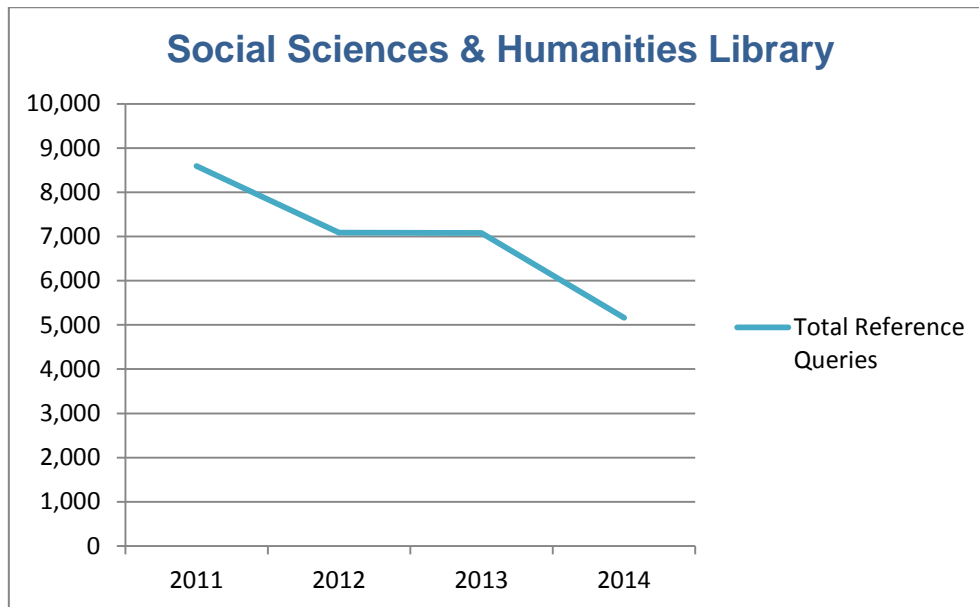


Fig.1 Decline in reference queries at the Social Sciences & Humanities Library

Source: University of Queensland Library; Annual Libstats Time Series Report; Web; 22 Sept. 2014.

These figures show an overall trend of declining research help queries received at the desk in the Social Sciences & Humanities Library. In 2011 queries averaged 8,592 per month. In 2012 queries averaged 7,087 per month. In 2013, queries averaged 7,083 per month. To date in 2014, queries have averaged 5,163 per month.

The Social Science's Librarian's session aims to hone students' research skills and contribute towards accomplishing the course outcomes. It covers information literacy (database selection, search terms and refinements) as well as digital literacy (downloading full-text articles, downloading, organising and storing images). The Librarian also demonstrates searches for subject specific resources such as exhibition catalogues, image databases, gallery websites as well as customised search tools such as LibGuides for Art History. Even though this is a third year student cohort, a number of students find this session presents new insights into research. It also provides a forum for students to ask further questions that they might not have otherwise asked.

Students studying curating often need to search strategically to find quality information where there is either too much or not enough source material. Scholarly information can be more difficult to obtain when students are researching local or emerging artists. The print collection is still important for accessing book chapters, exhibition catalogues or artist monographs. In an increasingly online environment, artist monographs and other non-scholarly publishers' books, which are essential to art and curating studies, are not yet published online (Yeo 39). Students therefore need to access print books or exhibition catalogues from the Library shelves.

In cases where little is published, students take a more lateral approach to research. Researching an artist's Curriculum Vitae often reveals previous exhibitions that they've shown in at various galleries. Students can then contact relevant galleries for small run exhibition catalogues of works or other grey literature produced about the artist. Searching newspaper databases for reviews of previous exhibitions can also prove useful, as can online artist archives contained within gallery websites. Finding this type of information is a reminder of the detective style research that is required of curators.

An example of this type of multi-faceted approach is seen in the students who researched Brisbane based artist, Sandra Selig. While the Social Sciences & Humanities Librarian helped the student to locate a handful of articles about Selig's work in databases (Art Bibliographies Modern and Art Abstracts), further research was also undertaken by finding exhibition catalogues held in the Social Sciences & Humanities Library and the student contacting galleries Milani and Sarah Cottier Gallery, to obtain further information on the artist's recent exhibitions.

A lecture presentation on archival research is given by the Fryer Librarian for Art History. The Librarian outlines the range of material included in Fryer's special collection and how these formats can be accessed and used. As a special collections Library, Fryer holds both published and unpublished material on Queensland and Australian history, literature, art and architecture. Materials collected include books, manuscripts, photographs, artworks, gallery files and significant objects. Students can access a number of digitised photographs, drawings and publications from Fryer's collection in eSpace, the University's online repository. Students studying curating, however, also need to find and access the primary source material that hasn't been digitised in order to provide historical contexts for artworks.

Searching special collections archives requires a different awareness from searching academic Library collections. Students need to consider: access (closed stack retrieval), special call numbers, searching by provenance and using local finding aids.

Like most other archival collections, Fryer has its own local call numbers for special formats such as manuscripts, ephemera, microform and fiche. For example, FGF refers to a Fryer Gallery File, which contains art ephemera organised by Art Gallery. The Queensland Art Gallery files and other smaller gallery files contain material such as art exhibition catalogues, invitations and ephemeral items relating to Australian artists exhibited in Queensland galleries. The gallery files also demonstrate the way manuscripts and archives are organised by *who* collected or created the collections, by provenance, not by subject or topic. Understanding the concept of provenance and how primary source material is organised - and searching by organisations or places - therefore becomes more important.

Further library support is offered online, building on the library-student research support relationship. The Art History Librarian from the Social Sciences & Humanities Library is given access to the course Blackboard site, the online Learning Management System (LMS) for this course. The slides from the Librarian's presentation are also published on the *Curating in the Visual Arts* Blackboard site and students are advised to email the Art History librarians from either Library after the presentations if they need further help.

Vocational Experience

Vocational experience is another feature of *Curating in the Visual Arts*. Students participate in Student Industry Placements (SIPs) as part of the assessment for the course, including writing Expressions of Interest for the internship positions and being interviewed for the roles. The course outline states, “A significant aspect of *Curating in the Visual Arts* is the opportunity for a Project Placement in an art gallery, working on a curatorial project on campus or researching a visual arts collection” (ARTT3117 Course Profile).

While some students worked on projects with Regional Galleries Queensland, Art from the Margins and Queensland Centre for Photography, others worked on curatorial projects in the Fryer Library. Five students were interned to Fryer over a period of eight weeks and participated in projects co-ordinated by the Fryer Librarian for History, Philosophy, Religion & the Classics. The Librarian worked with students during this period, supporting their hands-on experience of archival research and curation. During their internship, the students curated two separate projects that made use of Fryer collections: a War and Conflict display and a Forgan Smith Building display.

The students working on the War and Conflict display project were required to prepare an exhibition plan and identify items from the Fryer collection that could be included in a white gloves tour of the Library. The exhibition featured primary and secondary materials selected by the interns, which were displayed in four flat display cabinets and a fifth tower cabinet in the Fryer reading room.

Students were therefore directly involved in managing the selection of items from special collections, researching the provenance of objects and displaying records accurately as well as providing access to and showcasing archival collections. When curating these projects, it was necessary for students to look beyond the layout of the objects displayed. Climate control, handling of unique, precious items and copyright permissions for the exhibition of photographs were just some of the considerations students needed to take into account.

The second project, the Forgan Smith Building display, required students to curate and theme photographs for a digital display screen in the School of History, Philosophy, Religion and the Classics, located within the Forgan Smith Building.

The Forgan Smith is one of the most iconic buildings on the university’s St.Lucia campus. Architecturally impressive, it forms the central tower of the Great Court’s sandstone cloisters. It was used as a military base in the war before becoming the first home of the Arts Faculty, and indeed home to the UQ Art Museum before it relocated to its current building.

Students were required to prepare a multiple series of digital photographs showcasing the history of the Forgan Smith building. As a guideline, each group of photographs could be themed around a particular topic such as student life, or an historical timeline of the building. As with the War and Conflict display, the Fryer Librarian provided the project plan to the students and met with them at regular intervals to make sure that they were able to meet milestones and deadlines.

Although these projects were working with more historical than art related material, the students (I sought feedback from) found the experience extremely valuable. One student commented: “I was definitely able to consider ideas about spectatorship and how a viewer perceives a piece. It meant that I played around a lot with the layout of my mini exhibition, thinking about how a spectator might

travel around a space. As a curator, you do have to think carefully about what you include and after several afternoons surrounded by some really stark images of WWI, I definitely knew how that felt” (Fairdough).

For another student, applying archival research techniques and accessing Fryer’s collection was an invaluable part of finding the pieces to curate for the exhibition and white gloves tour. “Being immersed in the history (Vietnam and war protest movement) and learning strategies for researching using primary source material were the most valuable elements [of the SIP] for me. I was amazed by the quality of Fryer’s collection and would be very keen to use it some more” (Ramsey).

Virtual Exhibition Spaces

Students also design and develop virtual exhibition spaces, using Ortelia Curator™, as part of the assessment for the *Curating in the Visual Arts* course. Ortelia Curator™ allows students to experiment with the curatorial process in a virtual space (Interactive 3D Applications for Galleries and Museums). Using this software, students design an exhibition layout in the gallery spaces of the UQ Art Museum. This involves mapping where artworks will be installed, importing digital images of artworks and setting the dimensions as well as placing and editing Didactic panels.

Students’ digital literacies are tested as they acquire skills for working with new software that requires specific use of the mouse as well as screen navigation. However, both design and aesthetic skills are in the foreground of this assessment, as students work in a relatively small exhibition space with a selected group of artworks to curate and arrange with visual and thematic cohesion (Holland).

Future Plans

Apart from providing ongoing research support for this subject, Librarians plan to work on more projects with students in the future. Two proposed collaborations include an artist files project and the launch of a student curated exhibition.

The artist files project is intended to further develop students’ archival research skills and enable them to build their own research material. It is also intended to develop an archive of information and ephemera related to artists and artworks historically connected to the University through exhibiting at the UQ Art Museum. Art History Librarians from the Social Sciences & Humanities and Fryer Libraries would provide workshops for students who would need to acquire archival search skills, working with older formats and digitising any relevant items.

At present, this is still in the planning and development stage, and there are still questions to be answered, such as:

- Would the archive be only in print, only digital or both?
- Where would the physical collection be located?
- Where would the digital version be located (in a shared Endnote Library)?

Another prospective project is to hold an exhibition of student curatorial work in the foyer of the Library’s Duhig building. Students would be invited to curate an exhibition of both digital and print

primary and secondary sources from Library collections related to an artist and works from the UQ Art Museum. The space consists of an alcove that contains three flat screen monitors and a display cabinet. It is used as a link between Library buildings. As part of the exhibition, holding an opening would bring people into this space for a more focussed gathering, to interact with the displays and the students that curated them.

Conclusion

Curating in the Visual Arts reflects 21st educational skills through its assessment research tasks, which also incorporate digital and visual literacies. Students also gain an understanding of practical contexts for studying art curatorship through their involvement in the industry placements. The feedback received from the course co-ordinator and students about the collaborative Library support for the course has been very positive. The Library is a part of the whole network of people and institutions that contribute to this course and its learning outcomes – the UQ Art Museum, the School of English, Media Studies and Art History, The Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art, and various other local Arts organisations – all of which make up *Curating in the Visual Arts*.

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