Inspired Archives: Introducing Students to the Visual Culture of a University
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The thought of the university archives perhaps brings to mind the slightly dusty historian, scouring the documents of the past. These collections, however, are often rich with visual material—whether that be historical photographs of growth and development, events on campus, images from the student newspaper, or maps and other realia from generations of scholars.

This poster session presents two class assignments created by the art librarian at Oakland University for studio art majors in which students explore and connect resources from the archives to their course art projects and personal artistic visions. These assignments engage students with the visual culture of the university, fulfill both visual and information literacy objectives, and promote a sense of connection to the university as place, aligning with the retention and engagement efforts upon which so many administrations are now focusing. Consider these just one way to think outside the “bibliographic instruction box” and promote the library as a place of creative inquiry and inspiration.

SA350: Black and White Photography I
Students in this course, per the course catalog, “Focus on the development of traditional photographic technique and the conceptual practice of photography as a fine art medium.” This is an early course in the studio major. Many students have not yet taken their required art history courses at this point, and are still learning the skills of interpreting and analyzing photographic compositions.

This class has a unit on contemporary journalism and photography, in which students are asked to create art with a social or political purpose.

Related archival collection: Back issues of the student newspaper, currently named the Oakland Post. During the fall semester of 2014, students were given issues dating from the 1960s.

Assignment: Choose one interesting image, and discuss it while considering how the image/test responded to each other, the formal elements of the image, and how one might recreate this photo today given contemporary concerns.

Learning benefits for students:
- Awareness of archival collections as valuable research resources
- Exposure to original published material, as opposed to reproductions/slides
- Understand photographs within their original context (text/image)
- Connect with the history of their university
- Practice interpreting photographs and artists/editorial intent


1.1; 2.1; 3.1; 4.1; 7.1

Results:
- Students enjoyed this activity, spending a good amount of time browsing the newspaper archives and discussing the campus’ past.
- Assignments show a growing awareness of the image as a means of communication. Many discuss how the photograph adds to the story, or how it reflects the zeitgeist. Several drew connections between what was going on then versus the issues of the campus now and how the images reveal those concerns.
- Students mentioned they would have enjoyed using the newspapers from the 1800s, not only because of the personal history that would ensue, but also because several students had parents who had attended in that era.

SA381: Advanced Photography
Students in this course, per the course catalog, are expected to demonstrate “Progression from assignment-based work to individualized bodies of work in photography emphasizing self-expression, use of materials, and aesthetic critical theory.”

Students in this course have a photography assignment to shoot on location at Meadow Brook, Oakland University’s historic estate home. When asked to do something creative, my dark sense of humor is always considered, which took place the week after their trip to the archives.

Related archival collection: Historic photographs of the estate and events held there, with the collection spanning the past fifty years.

Assignment: The course does not include much writing, so the professor wanted to incorporate a writing-intensive activity. Students were directed to choose at least three images and create a narrative story around those images. They were to discuss aesthetics, formal qualities as well as why they thought the images could relate to each other, and were encouraged to be creative in their interpretations. (This project was inspired by Erin Lawlor’s “Primary Source Slaves” activity in The Embedded Librarian’s Cookbook.)

Learning benefits for students:
- Awareness of archival collections as valuable research resources
- Exposure to an archival photograph collection
- Understand the role of the archives for the university
- Connect with the history of their university
- Practice interpreting photographs and artists/editorial intent


1.1; 2.1; 3.1; 4.1; 7.1

Results:
- Surprisingly, given that these are studio art students, some were very resistant to the creative writing aspect of the assignment. Several preferred a factual analysis of the photographs they had chosen.
- Those who did choose to be more creative/fictional in their interpretations provided quite entertaining, clever fables which drew from the visual material.
- Students noted that the activity assisted them in planning and preparing for the photography assignment, which took place the week after their trip to the archives.

Ask Yourself!

- What unique visual materials are present in my university/college’s special collections or archives?
- How do these collections connect to the student learning objectives for studio art or art history courses?
- Are students aware of archives and special collections, other than what they experience in museums?

Recommended Reading:
Greer, Katie. “Connecting inspiration with information: Studio art students and information literacy instruction.” Communications in Information Literacy 9, no. 1 (Spring 2015). (forthcoming)

Hubbard, Melissa, and Megan Lotts. “Special Collections, Primary Resources, and Information Literacy Pedagogy.” Communications in Information Literacy 7, no. 1 (2013): 24-38.

