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Creating a Showstopper

Student-Curated Exhibitions

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NUTRITION INFORMATION

This recipe details a scaffolded approach to student curation of an exhibition using primary source materials. Students become familiar with special collections and learn how to search for, evaluate, and interpret primary sources. It allows them to build up an argument in a new fashion by thinking through how to choose, present, and order items. It also compels students to think critically about their audience because the exhibitions are viewed by the general public rather than solely by their instructor.

However, instructors should consider if the assignment requirements can be met using collection materials. In our experience, the limited number of visually engaging primary sources tied to the theme of the course sometimes made it difficult for students to create displays with compelling narratives that were also visually engaging.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

- Become familiar with searching for and accessing items in special collections.
- Tie abstract concepts from a course to concrete primary sources.
- Think critically about how to choose and present items for a larger audience.

RELEVANT RBMS/SAA JOINT GUIDELINES

2B, 3B, 4C

COOKING TIME

- at least 2 class sessions, 1 to 2 hours each, plus time to prepare for and clean up after each class
- consultation time with students, 1 to 2 hours per group
- exhibition set-up time, 1 to 2 hours per group

This is a “showstopper” recipe that requires quite a bit of work—but the result is worth the effort.

NUMBER SERVED

Flexible. This lesson plan was designed to serve 10 students who work together in pairs and create small exhibitions that are thematically linked to the topic of the course. The lesson plan can be modified to accommodate smaller or larger classes, with students working independently or in small groups; key considerations include your time, the availability and size of your exhibition space, and the amount of topical materials that are appropriate for student-curated exhibitions.

INGREDIENTS

- Visually compelling primary source materials, such as illustrations from books, prints, and archival documents that are not overly text-heavy. Materials should not have preservation issues that would make them unsuitable for display.

This lesson plan was developed by the instructor for a history course that analyzed the construction of sex and gender in London between 1700 and 1900. To create their exhibitions, students used a variety of materials: books, manuscripts, letters, legal documents, periodicals, and ephemeral items.

- Exhibition space.
- Cardstock for exhibition captions.
- Supports and mounts for books, documents, objects, and labels; any other supplies necessary to create the display.
- Exhibition guidelines, including requirements for the assignment (e.g., number of sources, length, how it will be assessed) as well as instructions for creating professional displays (e.g., style guides and proofreading tips).

PREPARATION

- Assemble your “ingredients” (see above)!

Start Cooking: Initial Class Visit

- The first class visit should introduce students to special collections and to primary source research. To allow them to practice their curation skills, our active learning exercise breaks students into small groups of 2 to 4 and assigns them a number of primary sources that the instructors have selected tied to a theme related to the course. The students are asked to analyze the preselected primary source materials and to create small exhibitions that they will present to the class. Students determine the order of the materials and how books are displayed and must explain their decisions to the class during short presentations.

Simmer: Independent Research

- The next step is for students to conduct independent research. First, students are broken into pairs. Then, they are told to come up with a theme and find 4 items from special collections that express that theme. We gave students 2 weeks for searching, requesting, evaluating, and making the final selection of their exhibition items. Students are given an instructional handout explaining how to search the catalog and how to request materials from special collections. They are also provided with a list of possible sources and directions on how to write an introduction for their exhibit and how to compose item descriptions. (In our assignment, one student is in charge of writing the introduction and the other

is in charge of writing the item descriptions.)

Stir: Consulting with the Librarian

- Next, the students must meet with the special collections librarian to review their items and make sure they can be displayed. We also used this time to allow students to select the case their items are to be displayed in and to schedule a time for the exhibition installation.

Adjust the Seasoning: Second Class Visit

- This visit is an opportunity for students to stage their exhibitions for critique by their instructor and classmates. Each pair of students sets up their materials, including their introduction and item descriptions, and presents their exhibition to the class. At this point, the items are not in their cases, but rather presented on tables in special collections. During the class, students have time to independently view the exhibitions and fill out anonymous critique forms for each group. Students then have an opportunity to revise their projects if needed; the revised introduction and item descriptions are due a few days later. During this class, students also begin the process of choosing supports and mounts that they will use to install their materials.

Serve: Installation

- The special collections librarian super-

vises the installation (and ensures that materials are handled appropriately) but allows students to make their own decisions about how to set up their exhibitions. For our assignment, students also wrote a paper on the theme of their exhibition.

TASTE TEST

We assess this assignment by analyzing the quality of student work against our stated learning objectives. This is first done during the second class visit, where students' drafts are evaluated to see if they connect course concepts to their primary sources and if they present their items in a way that will resonate with a general audience. The final exhibitions are then evaluated for these same objectives by the librarian and course instructor. We also examine the effectiveness of the exhibitions by looking at the narrative conveyed in the captions as well as the selection and display of materials. The final paper written by students—which is to relate their items to their chosen theme—also gives further insight into their ability to link abstract concepts to sources. Those attempting this recipe could also consider setting up a survey near the exhibitions that asks viewers for feedback.