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Cooking Up Curators

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NUTRITION INFORMATION

This recipe materialized from a faculty/librarian partnership for an art history course. Rather than a traditional show-and-tell model, the instructors encouraged students to engage with self-directed learning by having them curate small group exhibits of primary and secondary source material and present these mini-exhibits to their classmates.

Using this recipe, students will apply the knowledge they've acquired through their previous class lectures and readings to make meaningful connections between object and theory, practice the handling and analysis of rare and historical material, and exercise their curatorial eye to create a visually engaging arrangement and display of material.

Although the focus of our class was on the revolutionary art and ideas of the Russian and Soviet avant-garde, it will work for any class in art history, visual studies, or history using special collections material.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

- Develop basic curatorial skills by visually displaying research materials and rare objects to create a cohesively curated exhibit.
- Advance critical thinking skills by situat-

ing primary source materials in relation to theory and scholarship already encountered.

- Enhance oral communication and peer collaboration skills as students share observations and ideas regarding selected materials and work together to agree upon exhibition layout and theme.

RELEVANT RBMS/SAA JOINT GUIDELINES

1A, 1C, 3A, 3B, 4C

COOKING TIME

- 3–4 days to select and review materials (primary and secondary)
- 1–2 days logistical planning (talking points, rehearsal, and slides)
- 1–1.5 hours class setup
- 1 hour 20 minutes for class

NUMBER SERVED

24 (a minimum of 12 students who can be divided into groups of 3 to 4)

INGREDIENTS

- PowerPoint or Google Slides
- 3–4 tables that display material thematically. Example:
 - Theme 1: Russian Avant-Garde: El Lissitzky and Malevich

- Theme 2: Ballet Russes: Baskt, Kandinsky, Goncharova
- Theme 3: Movements: Bauhaus, Futurism, Constructivism, Dada
- 3–4 tables for group exhibits
- exhibit support supplies (foam, lead snakes, etc.)
- a diverse range of special collections materials (i.e., posters, photographs, correspondence, clippings).
- pencil and printed bibliographies for note taking
- smartphones or laptops (Wi-Fi enabled) for information reference

PREPARATION

- Success of the recipe depends on students having engaged with their readings to connect the materials with their understanding and new ideas. Suggested: 4 to 5 weeks of prior class instruction!
- Book a classroom with enough tables or flexible space.
- Research class themes and select relevant material.
- Organize material into “themes” for tables.
- Create PowerPoint presentation that includes (1) brief introduction, (2) textual instructions for the class activity, and (3)

prompt questions to guide students in their observations.

- Print bibliographies and title cards for tables to indicate each theme.
- Gather pencils and paper.
- Lay out material by theme at each table.
- Set up exhibit supplies in proximity to curating tables.
- *Warning:* Ensure a classroom environment that is supportive for all types of learners and public speaking comfort levels as students will need to be active in their group discussions and presenting in front of the class.

Introduction and Group the Students (5–10 minutes)

- Welcome your students and introduce them to the activity with the support of your PowerPoint presentation.
- Divide the class of students into 3 to 4 groups (or simply match the number of groups to the number of tables and themes). Instruct your students to sit with their groups at one of the themed tables.
- As a class, discuss what makes a meaningful exhibit and what to look for in an object, for example: visuality, relevance to theme, relevance to other items.

Examine the Selected Materials (25–30 minutes)

- You'll want to have your students look closely at the objects (using your content slides for guidance) for about 8 to 10 minutes. After minutes are up (be

sure to give a 2-minute warning), stop them, and have them move as a group to the next table.

- Repeat this until all groups have visited each of the themed tables.

Select a Single Object to Focus On (5 minutes)

- At this point ask your students to select 1 object (based on all the material they encountered) that appealed to them. This is the object they will use when they are cocurating their exhibit as a group.
- Encourage them to talk among themselves as they select their object and

to utilize their professor's expertise as needed.

Connect the Objects to Themes of the Class (10 minutes)

- Ask your students to discuss among themselves any connections they observed between the items they selected and the course readings and lectures. Encourage your students to agree on a theme that unifies their items and (hopefully) come up with a fun title for their exhibit.
- Make sure that the instructors and professor circulate during this time to support the students' creativity.



Figure 1. Student group looking at a selection of special collections materials.

Set Up the Group Exhibits (10 minutes)

- Once your students are ready to share their work, ask them to take their selected items to a vacant curator table (ideally in the middle of the classroom) and begin to arrange their exhibits using support supplies (e.g., foam, lead snakes, clear polyester strips).

Present Group Exhibits to the Class (15–20 minutes)

- When groups are ready, they will present their exhibit to the class, with students discussing their object and how it relates to other items in the exhibit.
- Instructors should encourage their students to explain any curatorial choices,

for example: *Why did the item intrigue you? How might it relate to what you've learned in class? Why did the group come up with the "theme" it did?*

Wrap Up the Session (5 minutes)

- After everyone has shared their exhibits, congratulate them on a job well done.
- Try to leave time for final comments from the professor.
- If it appears that there are no more thoughts or questions left, remind students that the skills that they acquired during this session can translate to real-world careers such as special collections librarianship, archival studies, and curatorial practice.

TASTE TEST

It will be difficult to conduct a formative or summative assessment of a creative and collaborative one-shot session. However, you should be able to informally measure how successful the session was by observing the relative ease students had in connecting the themes of the class with the material in their presentations. Ideally, each group should be able to

- unify their individual selections through a theme and title
- map concrete one-to-one connections between the objects (both primary and secondary sources) and context or theory from the class lectures in their presentations



Figure 2. Student presenting their group exhibit to the rest of the class.

If students struggled in any area, there may need to be adjustments in either the selection of the material, the clarity of the instruction, or the time allotted for observing the material or for group discussion.

You can confirm your assessment of the class in conversation with the faculty, who should be able to provide you with feedback as to the overall success of the session. For us, one of the most meaningful signs of success was student interest in evolving their curatorial skills and working closely with primary sources. Many of the students who participated in the initial session sought out internships to develop these very skills.