Displays and exhibitions in art libraries

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ARLIS UK & Ireland
Art Libraries Society
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Introduction

Based on the experiences of ARLIS members, this publication will look at key areas of exhibition creation in a library context from planning to promotion, finance to feedback. While a body of literature does exist on library exhibitions and displays, the majority is written from an American perspective and is designed for the general library. Here the aim is to focus on exploiting the resources of art libraries in particular, on both their collections and the expertise of their librarians.

There are very few courses currently run for library staff on putting together displays and exhibitions. Those that are available tend to focus on basic skills in display work. Generally they do not incorporate exhibition design skills such as curating, creating storylines, showcase arrangements, to name but a few. It is also interesting that many libraries in art institutions, whether they are museums, art galleries or art colleges do not exploit the wider knowledge of their institutional colleagues. The hope is that the examples and tips provided by the art librarians suggest new avenues of exploration. To this end thematic chapters are interspersed with librarians' own case studies. Whilst initially thinking mainly of how you exhibit the library's collection within the library, it soon became clear that equally important were exhibitions outside the library and the display of artists' and students' work inside the library.

Firstly there is a look at the motivations behind your exhibition – who do you hope to attract and what do you hope to achieve? Once that is established next comes the planning stage – financing and preparing the exhibition (and clearing it up afterwards). The design section looks at the research process and the opportunities to move into curatorial worlds, including security and safety considerations, whilst the section on promoting your exhibition examines the best ways to attract an audience. Finally there is a section on evaluating your success before concluding with the top ten tips for a successful exhibition, as promoted at the editors' poster session at the 2008 ARLIS Conference.

There are many general rules that can apply to both smaller displays and larger exhibitions. For reasons of space, reference in the text is to exhibitions but the application of these chapters to displays is, however, also implied.
Chapter 1 – Why create an exhibition?

Why do you plan exhibitions and displays? Who are you doing it for? What are you trying to achieve? How does it benefit you, your users and your libraries? Is there another more appropriate way to communicate with your users than an exhibition?

AIMS

The most frequently quoted reason for organising a display or exhibition is to publicise the library collection to encourage greater use. The scale can range from a simple display of new books to promoting a specific collection. London Metropolitan University, for example, uses exhibitions to promote the Materials and Products collection:

‘I organise occasional exhibitions to promote the Materials and Products collection to students and staff... The goals were to promote the Materials Library to a wider audience – illustrating its work within the department and to improve the collection’s coverage of technical textile materials.’

Exhibitions can therefore promote not just the objects within special collections, but also the existing work done by academic and library staff using them. This is taken further by the University of Birmingham, where exhibitions are part of a general strategy to encourage closer liaison between the library and academic departments:

‘There is great potential in developing a future programme of seminars and workshops to support the exhibitions to achieve more involvement both within the Art History department and also within other relevant disciplines, such as History and English.’

Promoting a special collection can therefore go beyond just communicating with your library users. It can encourage a two-way dialogue where your library users communicate with you, based on a clearer understanding of the strengths of the library collection and staff. Politically it can also be important to raise the library’s profile as a vibrant, innovative and central resource for your institution.

How far the aims of your exhibition are clarified during the planning stages depends a great deal on your institution’s philosophy and procedures, but it becomes harder to evaluate your success (discussed in Chapter 5) if your aims are not defined first in some form. Conversely without some evaluation of past exhibitions, it becomes more difficult to formulate aims for future exhibitions. Whilst a general aim is usually promotion and publicity, the actual content of the exhibition will form the basis of more specific aims and goals. It is likely that you will have to prioritise different aims for different exhibitions, as part of a general exhibition policy.

The Birmingham Institute of Art and Design (BIAD) sums up the human side of the library world by stating that ‘our aim was to build on and maintain good relations with our users.’

To that end, perhaps the simplest way to determine the relevance of your aims to your target audience is to form a small focus group and ask them what they would like to gain from the exhibition experience.

AUDIENCE

Exhibitions are a way of communicating with your audience in a more general manner than is possible at the enquiry desk. Your audience can be broadly divided into two groups; those who would be in the library anyway, and those who will come, at least initially, to see your exhibition. For a small display of new acquisitions, your focus will be primarily your library users. The larger the exhibition, the broader the scope of your intended audience.

The majority of case studies for this publication come from academic libraries with mainly student library users. Yet this population of students can be subdivided further to focus on specific groups of students, perhaps by course level or by subject topic. Bath University decided it needed to communicate with a specific group of users, so aimed to enhance the visual appeal of the library:
'We had identified that Graphics students used the library less than our other Art and Design students, so we decided to produce an eye-catching display of unusual book bindings.'

In other cases, such as at the University of Westminster, the aim is to appeal to all library users by showcasing lesser-known areas of the library collection:

'The Learning Resources Centre at the Harrow campus of the University supports staff and students from a wide range of subject areas, it is not solely an art and design resource. For this reason we try to develop exhibitions that will appeal to all library users, although often the visual qualities of the art and design material lend themselves better to display... The displays are intended as a point of interest, to show off objects or collections rather than to provide detailed information about them.'

![Image](image.jpg) 1. Preparing a book for display (photograph Anita Friend); IMG 5666

Here the Learning Resources Centre underlines the point that displays and exhibitions are part of an ongoing dialogue with library users rather than an end in themselves.

As a starting point for discussion and development, they are invaluable for providing a strong visual connection to students. Additionally an institution’s staff should not be neglected as an audience, as they are often unaware of their own institutional resources. At the Birmingham Institute of Art and Design:

'The aim of the exhibition is to make this material more widely known to the academic staff and to encourage them to think of ways that they can incorporate it into their teaching and research.'

In roles where academic liaison is an important part of the job, one picture (or book binding, or interesting artefact) can often take the place of a thousand words. This can have benefits for library staff later, since they often have to make decisions on what is relevant to students without being given the full picture by academic staff.

Yet is it too restrictive to focus only on your primary audience of library users? At Chelsea College of Art and Design its focus was sufficiently unusual to attract interest from the wider academic world:

'As an example of practice based research connected with an Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funded research project, it generated particular interest among the art and design research community. The exhibition also attracted the attention of staff and students working in book arts or with artists’ books, both within and outside the institution involved.'

Not every library will have the space, time or inclination to achieve similar results, but any unique features of your collection are worth considering in a broader academic context.

Similarly at the University of Birmingham displaying the library collection outside the library buildings reached a much wider audience of the general exhibition-going public:

'The Barber Fine Art Library and Special Collections benefit from the higher profile gained by having their holdings displayed in the prestigious setting of
the Barber Institute and seen by members of the public who would not normally enter the libraries.”

Here both the location and the rarity value of the objects had a wide appeal putting the library collection on a par with any museum collection in terms of interest levels. While many library exhibitions may be as interesting, public perceptions of their accessibility when displayed within the library may unintentionally restrict your audience. There is a strong tradition of public access to museums and galleries. Libraries, especially in the academic sphere, are more associated in the public mind with guardianship and restrictions, however erroneous that may be.

The shorter an exhibition, the more focused on one audience you are likely to be. Once you have established your aims and who your intended audience is, it is much easier to realise the benefits of your exhibition.

**BENEFITS**

If the aim of most exhibitions and displays is to publicise the library collection, one of the clearest benefits is to encourage greater use of that collection. This is most clearly shown through small displays of material which can be borrowed, as occurred at the Birmingham Institute of Art and Design:

‘Resources used for this promotional display were borrowed leaving gaps in our display. John Ridgway commented “...well, that’s the whole point. What would be the point of a display of items you couldn’t ‘...take out on loan’.”

This does, of course, necessitate a back-up group of items for display to replace those items borrowed. Larger displays may include a mix of reference items, artefacts and books for loan. Conversely, exhibitions may increase the amount of material in the library, as more publicity about the collection’s strengths may encourage people to donate items. This was the case for the University of Westminster’s archive:

‘At least one member of staff approached the archive with a bequest of material following the exhibition, so the exhibition had a positive impact in increasing awareness of the archive collection.’

A further benefit may be an increased demand for information skills training as London Metropolitan University discovered that ‘a successful result is new/increased requests from staff and students for user education and introductions to using the library.’

While inevitably much of the focus on information skills training occurs at the beginning of the academic year, exhibitions can provide the impetus for users to re-evaluate their information needs – or to put it another way, they often don’t know they don’t know things until you tell them.

Many of the examples used discuss exhibitions of library materials, but, especially in art colleges, the library can be the venue for showcasing the work of others. At Cardiff University, for example, displaying student work within the library has the benefit of making the students feel the library is their space, rather than something more institutional:

‘Winning competition entries were displayed in the Architecture Library for one year. While not constituting a formal exhibition, the display was intended to give a sense of ownership of space to the students.’

This also benefited all staff and users of the library, since it contributed to a more ‘visually appealing library environment’, underlining the aesthetic benefits of a well-designed exhibition for the library.

But what are the benefits for you as librarians? While you may feel you know your collections sufficiently to support your users, preparing an exhibition or display forces you to discover your collection’s strengths and weaknesses. London Metropolitan University found preparing for an exhibition was ‘a good motivating force for acquiring new materials, and developing the collection.’
For a member of staff at the Van Gogh Museum Library, the new experience of creating an exhibition also created a growth of professional skills:

"For me as a librarian and the keeper of an important collection of nineteenth-century publications on art, organising this exhibition was an enriching experience... by acting more as curator and exploiting the possibilities of the collection."

Similarly at the University of Birmingham the collaborative approach to exhibition creation, with students, librarians and gallery curators involved, is described as:

"Very much a 'win win' opportunity...valuable curatorial experience such as editing and writing catalogue entries, exploring publicity and funding issues. They benefit from working as a team, and gain valuable experience in time management and forward planning. The interactive and collaborative nature of the project also produces an enriching exchange of ideas on the topic of the exhibition."

**SUMMARY**

Exhibitions can be created for:

- Specific groups of library users
- All library users
- Institutional staff
- Academic world
- General public

The benefits of organising an exhibition or display can include:

- Greater use of the collection
- Rise in user enquiries and demand for user education/information skills training
- Higher profile of library in the institution
- Increased donations to the collection
- Increased visual appeal of the library
- Increased user comfort levels
- Growth of library staff's professional skills

The main aims of exhibitions and displays are usually publicity and promotion - of the collection, of artefacts, of ideas and of research. Individual aims depend largely on the content of the exhibition.
The National Art Library (NAL) is a major public reference library, as well as being the Victoria and Albert Museum’s curatorial department for the art, craft and design of the book. The library’s strength lies in the range and depth of its holdings of documentary material concerning the fine and decorative arts of many countries and periods.

Books are included in many of the museum’s permanent and temporary displays, and occasionally there are exhibitions and displays devoted wholly to aspects of the book (e.g. 70 years of Penguin design, 2005; the Saint John’s Bible, 2006; Blood on Paper: the Artist and the Book, 2008).

Included here are two examples of very small displays held in a space just outside the library entrance (known informally as The Library Landing). There are plans to expand the ‘Library Landing’ programme into three or four cases over the next couple of years.
Display of magazines and journals

Why? There are four displays a year. Display one features new subscriptions from the previous twelve months whilst numbers two and four are topical, usually chosen to tie in with temporary displays and exhibitions in the Museum. Number three draws titles from the ‘Serials Trawl’, a programme of purchases of individual issues to highlight trends in magazine design.

Since the Library’s stacks are closed to the public, the only material directly accessible to visitors is the reference collection. Included in this is a selection of current periodicals, displayed on shelves in Perspex folders. This space is limited, so the ‘Focus on …’ periodicals displays were instigated as a very simple, rotating supplement to the usual core titles and draw readers’ attention to the breadth of the collection.

Benefits? In addition to the stated goals, it is useful for consolidating the Serial Librarian’s own knowledge of the collection and keeps collecting policy toward the front of her mind. Problems are largely confined to the shortage of her own inspiration and time.

The National Art Library also runs a ‘Book of the Month’ programme. This is usually a single item, in a very small case inside the Library, intended to alert the readers to the unseen breadth of the collections, and also to give staff the opportunity of a little display experience to learn the ropes. They are done to proper museum standards even though they are tiny. Since there is a cost-benefit question here the programme is being reviewed. If the displays can be put on the web additionally in future, it may seem more worthwhile.

Elizabeth James
Manages the cataloguing of the documentary and book collections of the National Art Library, V&A. Her research interests include the history of books on the decorative arts, especially the publications of the V&A (her bibliography on this subject was awarded a Library Association Besterman Medal).

Chapter 2 – Planning your exhibition


What are the benefits to planning your exhibition? Do librarians have the time to do this or can they work with other stakeholders? Who are your stakeholders? Students? Library staff? Gallery curators? Visitors? Researchers?

WHAT ARE YOU PROMOTING?

It is important to identify the reason you are doing the display or exhibition as this will undoubtedly inform the planning cycle. In an art and design college, for example, displays are often timed to coincide with various projects being undertaken by students. Once the project is over, the display may not be as useful. The timing of displays in this setting is therefore crucial to their success. At the Birmingham Institute of Art and Design promotional displays are scheduled to tie in with major exhibitions in the UK:
In June 2007, BIAD Libraries created a promotional display to coincide with the exhibition at the Barbican Art Gallery, London. The Barbican Art Gallery staged Panic Attack! Art in the Punk Years to coincide with two 30 year anniversaries: the Queen’s Silver Jubilee and the release of the Sex Pistols irreverent album God Save the Queen. Reactions and responses were noticeable – resources used for this promotional display were all borrowed.’

In a museum or gallery setting, there may be different reasons for putting on an exhibition. At the National Art Library, where access to parts of the collection is limited, they decided to try and showcase items from their famous stack:

‘The Library’s stacks are closed to the public therefore the only material directly accessible to visitors is the reference collection. Our Serials Librarian came up with an initiative to offer a changing thematic display of magazines and journals just inside the library near the door, as an attractor to browsing and to give people something to look at while they wait for requested material to arrive.’

Fundamental to any planning of an exhibition or display is concept and development. This is natural territory to a curator or designer in a specialist museum or art gallery context. Unlike curators or designers, however, librarians are not in dedicated roles and are often having to juggle front line duties with other bibliographic aspects of their jobs. So quite often this process ends up being rather rushed. Marincola (2006) describes the initial concepts as being represented in a ‘napkin sketch’. During the concept and development stage, a large amount of research, extensive planning and editing should take place. At the University for the Creative Arts (UCA), this is explained more clearly:

‘For the Learning Journal Display we came up with this idea of a sketchbook, but could not represent this visually as it would end up being costly. We then decided to photocopy pages of famous sketchbooks and enlarge these for the display...we had these large pages draped on fishing lines from the ceiling; it looked stunning and it cost very little...The students loved it.’

**DRAWING UP A PROPOSAL**

A more formal method of articulating an exhibition idea is to draw up a proposal. Kalfatovic (2002) suggests drawing up headings as follows:

- Proposed Title
- Overview
- Projected Audience
- Design
- Maintenance
- Staff
- Budget
- Projected Timeline
- Preliminary Object List

A template for this entitled ‘An example of an exhibition proposal’ is available at the back of this book. This proposal was for an online exhibition at the Smithsonian Institute called ‘Nile notes of a Howadji’ but it is a useful guide for developing any exhibition idea.

It could also act as a core document to use when bidding for funding or when pitching your idea to your line manager or institution. Equally it can be used as a working document during the planning and design stages, helping the exhibition team to visualise for what type of exhibition or display they are aiming.

**BEING ORGANISED**

At Bath Spa University, the librarian encourages the use of a spreadsheet or diary to enable a rolling programme of exhibitions:

‘If you plan in advance you will have time to do necessary research, write accompanying documentation and signage and to arrange the display itself. Planning in advance also means that your display cases/areas will always be in use and changing (library users notice changes; they tend to walk straight past things that stay the same).’
At Chelsea College of Art and Design, the library keeps an exhibition schedule of all display cases and areas in the library to enable planning for exhibitions of library material as well as student proposals for work to be displayed in the library:

'We have six display cases, a listening post and two LCD screens that can be used for showing video work. In addition we consider proposals involving any part of the library space and its fabric, including two outdoor terraces which are excellent spaces for large sculptural pieces. Using a planned schedule means that there is never an empty display case. The schedule is particularly useful at degree show time when the number of proposals usually increases. The schedule ensures that everything is on time and allows for alternative exhibitions in the event of unforeseen changes.'

Ensuring that you have a budget for displays is also important. The British Library, for example, may be able to afford a generous display budget, as it did in 2006 for the very successful Hans Christian Andersen display. However, the reality for most art and design libraries is not quite as grand. This does not mean however that you need do everything on a shoestring. You can create a business case for funding and either ask your own departments for a displays budget, or bid to external organisations like the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) or the Museum, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA). An example of the latter approach has been used at the University for the Creative Arts, in an initiative called To Hell with Culture, an exhibition inspired by its Herbert Read Archive at Canterbury. Initially the idea had been to host an exhibition in the library space to encourage greater use of this definitive collection of Read’s work, but because of the specialised interest that such material might attract, the venture soon attracted the interest of the Galleries Manager at UCA, and the plan changed to a more ambitious exhibition in a dedicated gallery space. Such projects require much more planning and thinking and inevitably involve much larger budgets:

'......we wanted to encourage a greater interaction with artists themselves, as Read had been such a strong voice in art education... so one idea was to commission artists to engage with the archive...we began to look into new funding streams in order to get this initiative off the ground...these pieces would be key showpieces in the exhibition.'

CHOOSING A TITLE

Thinking of an exhibition title is another key component and one which can develop as the planning process evolves, of course being mindful of copyright where applicable. According to Rowan Watson, Curator of the Blood on Paper exhibition at the National Art Library, titles should be: ‘...snappy and sum up the theme.’ Or you might take comfort from the words of Henry Ward Beecher (1851) who said that ‘words are pegs to hang ideas on.’

If you turn to the advertising industry here, you should start learning the ‘art of looking sideways’. Instead of just having the words ‘Learning Journals’ on a display, you could think imaginatively and replace it with something like ‘creative alchemy’. For ‘self portrait’, you could change the title to Me, myself and I, a De La Soul song, but definitely more appealing than the worthy (but dull) self portrait title. Both examples illustrate the idea of attracting your audience and drawing them in to the display area.

Exercise: See if you can come up with a snappy alternative title for these:

Artists’ Books

Architecture week

Video art

Walter Crane

Rare Books

Anarchist poetry
TO ARCHIVE OR NOT TO ARCHIVE

Lastly there is the archiving of the material you want to use in the exhibition or display. At the University for the Creative Arts, images are taken of all the displays, to use for future reference and to incorporate into library promotional literature. If you are going to showcase student work, both Bath Spa University and Chelsea College of Art and Design get students to sign a disclaimer, granting permission to use the images and to safeguard against any loss or damage to the art works. At Chelsea, they explain that:

‘Documentation of the exhibitions means our activity within the college as a site for exhibiting is recorded and does not go unnoticed. The archive of proposal forms and collection of photographs of exhibitions and events is a useful record for library staff to see what has been exhibited. This feeds back into our exhibition planning so that there is always variety....’

If you are working in a project team for an exhibition, you can also use Web 2.0 tools to archive your planning and research. An example of this, also at the University for the Creative Arts is the To Hell with Culture blog (see over), which houses all the research for the Herbert Read Exhibition and is being used to shape the planning and design of the actual exhibition scheduled for 2010. The advantage of using a medium like this is that it allows extra functionality with tools like RSS feeds, picture galleries and ready made categories and links. Thus you can start to see the display or exhibition taking shape visually.

SUMMARY

- Decide why you want to do the display or exhibition. Don’t just shove a few books in a display case and hope that the audience understands your intention.
- It is generally seen as a good idea to book spaces and have a rolling programme of displays/exhibitions.
- Try and find time to visualise how you think the display or exhibition could look. Draw out a ‘napkin sketch’.
- Try and get a displays budget so that you can buy props and materials. If you want to think bigger, see if you can get external funding to perhaps employ an artist in residence or commission a piece of work.
- Always choose a snappy title – the key is to engage the audience.
CASE STUDY 2: Creating exhibitions and displays at the University of Westminster

by Hazel Grainger, Academic Liaison Librarian (Art & Design)

The Learning Resources Centre (LRC) at the Harrow campus of the University supports students and staff from a wide range of subject areas and is not solely an art and design resource. For this reason we try to develop exhibitions that will appeal to all library users, although often the visual qualities of art and design material lend themselves better to display. In the past the items displayed have been from the lesser known areas of the library collections (e.g. Artists’ books), but we are now broadening our sources to try and incorporate different aspects of the University. The displays are intended as a point of interest, to show off objects or collections rather than to provide detailed information about them.

In spring 2007 it was agreed by library and archive staff to exhibit some artefacts from the University Archive in the LRC during the first few weeks of the academic year, timed to coincide with the arrival of new students. The following June there was a major fire on campus that destroyed much of the Art and Design school. The atmosphere was greatly altered as staff came to terms with what had been lost and worked to try and prepare new resources for the upcoming term. Following this the decision was made that it would be appropriate to focus the exhibition on Harrow material, to show a little of the past and ‘character’ of the campus.

There were two meetings during the summer vacation to view and select material from the Archive. The final choice included aerial photographs of the campus at various stages of its development, private view invitations, degree show brochures, photographs of the Queen formally opening the LRC, and some of students working in the studios and classrooms. Other materials were prospectuses from the different stages of the University’s life as a group of technical colleges and polytechnic and magazines self-published by past alumni in their student days.

The display area within the building is located just inside the entrance, near a casual group seating area, and comprises two full height glass sided lockable display cases, each with three glass shelves. For the Harrow Archive display, Perspex book stands and cubes were used as props to create volume. An A4 sign with the exhibition title and contact details was included, but individual items were not labelled. There was no display lighting as there were no nearby power sources, and there was a lot of natural light so the delicate nature of some items meant the exhibition ran for a few weeks only. It was publicised to staff across the campus via a bulk email, and was a designated place for students to gather when arriving for library inductions. There was no formal route for feedback, but comments received from staff and students were positive, and the number of people who took an interest in the display was encouraging. At least one member of staff approached the Archive with a bequest of material following the exhibition, so the exhibition had a positive impact in increasing awareness of the archive collection.

Hazel Grainger
Academic Liaison Librarian (Art & Design)
University of Westminster
Chapter 3 – Exhibition design

Exhibition design should be informative, educational and entertaining, highlighting attractions to new and existing audiences. In libraries, you are not working with a blank canvas. There are the constraints of existing book stock, layout and often limitations of budget. There are also the curatorial and design elements to consider. Venturing into the world of exhibition design for libraries within art institutions brings with it an expectation that the objects displayed will have gone through some curatorial design process. As a consequence, librarians often become designers of an exhibition or display by default. This is not a natural role for many, although it can lead to some rewarding new partnerships with artists and curators within your own institutions. Working within creative environments you may also learn a lot from the world of visual merchandising (aka window dressing), techniques more at home in the retail environment. This chapter offers some tips and advice from those librarians who have ventured into these areas.

RESEARCH

Do some background research for your display or exhibition as a way of getting an understanding of the books, artefacts or ephemera you want to display. This research should be ongoing and will inform the design you end up with and will draw in your audience. A good example of this is the preparation undertaken for the Herbert Read Exhibition at the University for the Creative Arts, scheduled for 2010. Each member of the curatorial team was commissioned to look at an aspect of Herbert Read’s life – the key themes selected were anarchy, poetry, art education and art criticism. This research, which is archived in the Herbert Read blog,¹ will then go on to shape the exhibition and the way that the artefacts and books will be displayed to the audience.

Anita Vriend at the Van Gogh Museum describes here how her research informed the choice of props for the Treasure from the library exhibition, explaining how the items displayed related to the changes in art in the nineteenth century:

‘The assortment of artists’ materials increased greatly in the course of the nineteenth century, partly as a result of painting en plein air. This development was demonstrated by displaying old manufacturers’ catalogues – containing paint samples and illustrations of portable easels, paint-boxes, tubes of paint and brushes – which were some of the most eye-catching volumes in the exhibition.’

¹ http://tohellwithculture.wordpress.com/
TELLING A STORY

The storyline can act as a blueprint for your exhibition or display. Creating a storyline involves several elements and according to Dean (1996) should consist of:

⇒ a narrative document – usually includes information about the exhibition such as knowledge of collections, object provenance and any other identified resources.
⇒ an outline of the exhibition – this will list the major topics and sub-topics contained in the exhibition theme. Storyboards may well be helpful here.
⇒ a list of titles, sub-titles and text – choose a title for the exhibition or display. This can set the tone and act as a curiosity ‘hook’. Sub-title texts are rather like newspaper headlines, guiding the visitor through the flow of information and relationships between objects. Label texts give the collection object a voice and should be presented in plain and concise language.
⇒ a list of collection objects – carefully coordinated with the development of the narrative and outline. At this point, the designer’s main function begins. Armed with all the information above, s/he will be able to configure the library/gallery space to maximise the objects and educational objectives of the exhibition or display.

If you just throw a pile of books in a display cabinet without any contextual information or any kind of interrelationship it will not attract your audience. Anita Vriend from the Van Gogh Museum articulates this very well in her dialogue on the Treasures from the library exhibition:

'It was important to me that the selection should tell the story I had in mind. Visual attractiveness was a key criterion in my choice of books, but I also included un-illustrated material that was interesting for its content alone.'

NARRATIVE

What is the message you wish to convey to your audience? The message becomes a story when it is given a narrative thread with a clear beginning, middle and end. Here, in a review of the Blood on Paper exhibition Charles Darwent (2008) illustrates this point:

‘This means the 60 art books in Blood on Paper are not the simple homage of one creative form to another you might have thought. All kinds of struggles are going on in the V&A’s show, between seeing and reading, intuiting and understanding, between literature and art...’

This narrative thread can be made more transparent if you have time to develop an online exhibition space. That way the audience can engage with selected areas at their own pace and perhaps in more detail. A good example of this was the Hans Christian Andersen exhibition held at the British Library in 2005.

8. © The British Library Board, Picture of Andersen is in the Royal Library, Copenhagen

NARRATOR

This is what drives the story forward. The narrator can be created using any number of mediums, such as text, graphics, or technology. If you think of text, you may want to

2 http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/reviews/blood-on-paper-the-art-of-the-book-v-a-london-820650.html
think about the importance of labelling or making statements about the work displayed. As Lorenc (2007, p128) points out:

‘Labels speak to the curator, whose job it is to articulate the reason for an exhibition. When curators don’t use labels, or when the labels are badly written, it may indicate the show was vaguely conceived from the start.’

Mention should be made here about accessibility. The whole point of good exhibition design is about improving the quality of the exhibition experience for all your audience. There are some very useful guidelines, for example on the type of text and background to use for dyslexic viewers. Dean (1996, p116) refers to the idea of ‘wayfinders’ which should be clear and highly visible textual information to orientate your audience to your display or exhibition. An example of this at the University for the Creative Arts was the use of a ‘why not follow this line’ arrow on the library floor, which guided the viewer to a display of artists’ books and other ephemera. If budgets allow, Dean also suggests using audio devices, high-contrast detailed photographs, close-captioned videos, interactive devices, which all help to enrich the learning experience:

‘Writing text for an exhibition is not as simple as telling the visitor everything you know about a subject. The objects in the exhibition are the primary focus of attention. The text that accompanies and explains them must answer questions posed by people viewing the objects.’

Quite often library displays just focus on the book stock and do not incorporate other media to boost the ‘experience’ for the audience. At the University for the Creative Arts, for example, displays often include moving images or audio work:

‘On a recent display on Concrete Poetry, we created a listening booth for students to check out Kurt Schwitters poetry, while Der Lauf der Dinge (the way of things) played silently on a loop...’

PATH

This is what gives the story its structure. This is about organising the space into a sequence to help your audience experience the exhibition – it can be arranged around a timeline, theme or hierarchy. In order to engage the visitor, you might also want to think about building up to the story and think about ways to reveal things step by step, rather than showing everything all at once. David Pulford at the University of Birmingham thinks juxtapositions are important here:

‘...aim for quality rather than quantity, as repetition would be boring...If there are interesting bindings, they could be included in their own right. You might
consider, for example, placing a modern travel book next to an 18th century one to show how things are changed.'

This was particularly the case with the Blood on Paper: Artists and Books exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 2008. The exhibition, which ranged from Matisse's Jazz and Picasso's Deux Contes, both from 1947, to The Secret Life of Plants, (made especially for the show by Anselm Kiefer), did not present a chronological display of books. Instead books were treated as objects and placed to establish their unique visual qualities and to resonate with their neighbours. These interesting juxtapositions made for a remarkable exhibition. Even the catalogue, which came in the form of a box catalogue, proved informative and fun to handle. As Marion Arnold (2009, p25), writes in her review of the exhibition:

'As with books, one goes back and forth, dips in and out of different booklets, and is beguiled by the creativity apparent in the artists' books and by the imaginative design and seductive imagery in the box.'

Alternatively you may want to think more experientially. At the University for the Creative Arts:

'The Foundation students were doing a Self Portrait unit. The Library was asked to showcase a few books on the subject...the focal point of the exhibition was the oval mirror in front of which students were encouraged to draw themselves...the final pieces were displayed on a 'washing line' in front of the display...passers by the display felt compelled to stop and look...'

CONTEXT

An exhibition does not stand in a void. How the audience approaches and engages with the exhibition is as important as the exhibition itself. Here this is explained well by Michael Glover, the Times reviewer of the Blood on Paper exhibition:

'The single greatest frustration about this show is that almost all these open books are in vitrines, and you can see only one spread. Most of what each artist has done, all that colourful invention, is lost to you, behind closed pages. Luckily, Watson gives me a way out. 'Well, a good half of the artists' books displayed in this show are owned by the Victoria and Albert Museum and if you go up to the library you can ask to see them'.

Encouraging active participation by your audience can be very rewarding, particularly when opportunities arise to use the library as a display space for example at degree show time. Here, Emily Glancy from Chelsea College of Art and Design explains:

'One proposal that was a particular success was a collaborative piece of work by BA Fine Art student Claire Mookerjee called the Library Exhibition Terminal. Claire made a display cabinet with interchangeable features with an accompanying book trolley and advertised for six Chelsea students and staff to make work that could be exhibited on or in the cabinet. The book trolley provided the participants with reference texts and material used for research and so suggested to others certain ways of navigating the library space.'

At Birmingham Institute of Art and Design, they created a display around the national Big Draw event called Tempting and Moorish:

'The display focused on the promotion of our Alhambra Collection and architectural resources...People were invited to be inspired, to allow the past to inform designs for the future, to make use of our rich resources and of a PC to record their drawings...the event was free and listed on the Big Draw website.'

THE LIBRARY AS EXHIBITION SPACE

The idea of using the library as an exhibition space has been mentioned in a number of the case studies received. At Chelsea College of Art and Design, where they encourage an active display of student work by means of an exhibition proposal, the librarian explains the type of work that has been displayed:

'These have been wide-ranging. There have been a number of exhibitions of students artists' books and multiples, interactive and collaborative pieces that
respond to the fabric and day to day workings of the library, a performance of screaming, bookshelves wrapped in sheets and a garden grown on the library terrace…’

For those of you, who may be involved in working groups on creating new builds or more innovative learning spaces, it offers a great opportunity to incorporate exhibition spaces within the library. As well as the examples given by Chelsea, there are emerging examples of this namely the Saltire Centre at Glasgow Caledonian University and the British Library exhibition space.

PROPS AND MATERIALS

The Royal College of Art Library believes the way to a good exhibition is to include objects other than books and has had knitted artwork, vinyls, illustrations, wool and even ceramic cups. These ‘props’ can attract the audience and draw them in to explore the display. At the London College of Fashion, one member of library staff has a background in retail and comments on the usual lack of appeal to a purely text based display:

‘So much of the material I see is text (typed and written) which doesn’t make for alluring displays, even if the content itself is quite interesting.’

She then goes on to explain that ‘I think of displays in terms of how I would arrange merchandise from when I worked in retail, keeping things clean and simple…’

If you do borrow some of these techniques from retail, you need to think about how you display the books/artefacts you are showcasing. You can use a variety of materials here - Perspex book supports, polyboard, dedicated showcases, fishing line, textiles, boards, etc. There is a useful list of suppliers and products in this area at the back of the book.

SUMMARY

• Do background research for an exhibition. It is so important to know about your subject in order to be able to reveal sentient and pertinent exhibits and explanations to tell your story.
• Good design will make your exhibition display more effective by:
  o making it stand out from the competition
  o ensuring its appropriateness to the audience
  o making the best use of the available space.
• Keep things clean and simple; think like a retailer.
• Create focal points and think about juxtapositions.
• Gen up on some curatorial speak. A recent article in the Times describes the origin and role of the curator:

  ‘The word “curate” comes from the Latin, curare, to take care, and I think that is an important notion. A curator should be someone who builds bridges between people and art, and that can be done in many different ways.’

• Label the books/artefacts being displayed, but do not overdo the information.
• Break up the display by using props and materials.
• Think of ways for the audience to interact with the display.

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3 http://www.gcal.ac.uk/saltirecentre/building/artists.html
4 http://www.bl.uk/whatson/exhibitions/
CASE STUDY 3: Perversity, periodicals and peregrinations: a series of exhibitions in the Barber Institute of Fine Arts

by David Pulford, Barber Fine Art Librarian

This case study offers an exciting twist to the theme of exhibitions in art libraries, as it involves the display of art library materials in an art gallery through partnership between History of Art Postgraduate students, librarians, curators and conservators. The case study is edited from contributions provided by staff and students from each cohort.

Since 2006 postgraduate students in the University of Birmingham’s History of Art Department have had the opportunity to work with librarians from the Barber Fine Art Library and the University Special Collections and with curators from the Barber Institute of Fine Arts in mounting a series of annual exhibitions:

Publicity and Perversity: the English satirical print 1750-1950
6 – 15 June 2008

Art and the Periodical: an exhibition of Modern Magazines
8 - 13 June 2007

Travel by the Book: Eighteenth-Century Illustrated Travel Writing
8 - 13 June 2006

The exhibitions have included a mixture of books and periodicals from the library collections and works on paper from the Barber Institute Collection. The first exhibition in the series Art and Migration: Art Works by Refugee Artists from Nazi Germany in Britain 11 - 15 July 2005, which coincided with an International Conference Exile and Patronage 11 -13 July 2005, did not involve the libraries.

The exhibitions are student-led and library involvement is at the request of the students who have already determined their broad theme. Librarians in Special Collections research the theme within the collections to provide a full range of relevant material and a more specific focus arises through perusal of the material and group discussion at sessions within Special Collections.
Problems can arise sometimes if some individuals are more enthusiastic than others or if members of the teams have very different ideas.

Funding over the years has come from the University of Birmingham Graduate School, the Roberts Fund, the Paul Mellon Centre, Junction 49 Fund (administered by the Guild of Students), the Heritage Collaborative Research Network and some from the History of Art Department. The funding available has depended to some extent on the focus of each exhibition.

The exhibitions are held in a teaching room on the ground floor of the Barber Institute, which limits the time the exhibition can be held. The design of each exhibition is influenced by the need to protect fragile exhibits, the desire to make the exhibition space (normally used as a seminar room) look more attractive and by the size of the cabinets. New cabinets have recently been purchased with money raised in response to the programme of exhibitions.

In at least one year the planning of workshops was a condition of funding. Although the workshops have not been well attended, there is great potential in developing a future programme of seminars and workshops to support the exhibitions to achieve more involvement both within the Art History department and also within other relevant disciplines on campus, such as History and English.

The exhibitions have benefited from being featured in the Barber Institute’s regular publicity literature and they have also been advertised in local papers, such as the Birmingham Post, the Metro and in local events magazines. Leaflets were distributed across various locations in Birmingham, posters were hung around campus, and the exhibition featured on the Special Collections website.

The success of the exhibitions is evaluated by sales of exhibition publications, recorded numbers of visitors and the responses of people invited to the Private View.

The exhibitions are very much a ‘win win’ opportunity. Each cohort of students gains valuable curatorial experience, such as editing and writing catalogue entries and exploring publicity and funding issues. They benefit from working as a team, and gain valuable experience in time management and forward planning. The interactive and collaborative nature of the project also produces an enriching exchange of ideas on the topic of the exhibition.

The Barber Fine Art Library and Special Collections benefit from the higher profile gained by having their holdings displayed in the prestigious setting of the Barber Institute and by being seen by members of the public who would not normally enter the libraries.

As a result of this ‘cross-sectoral’ partnership between students, librarians and gallery curators the History of Art Department has gained considerable expertise in obtaining funding for research and teaching projects.

David Pulford
Barber Fine Art Library
University of Birmingham
Chapter 4 – Promoting your exhibition

Also popular are flyers and leaflets which can be distributed within the library, within your institution or round the local area, depending on the scale of your exhibition.

It is now common to offer an email alert to all library users, using the existing library communication systems. Increasingly students could also receive this on mobile devices like phones and PDAs. While you can’t go into much detail on a mobile text alert, it makes a connection that can be explored at the user’s convenience. It can also be more than a simple what/when/where announcement – how about an interesting fact of the day culled from your exhibition? London Metropolitan University’s exhibition promotional materials included ‘email, posters, webpage [and] message of the day.’

The library website has a crucial role to play in promoting your exhibition. Here you can provide more text, more visual images and more supplementary material. The drawback for initially promoting your exhibition on the website is that users are less likely to check this regularly. Increasingly libraries are using social networking tools to communicate. If your users have a presence on Facebook, it makes sense to go where they are rather than expecting them to come to you.

Of course, with many demands on their attention, it’s still easy for your users to miss your exhibition. To draw a parallel with the world of property, physical location can be of key importance here. Much depends on the layout of your exhibition space as the University of Westminster found. It raised the profile of its exhibition by making it the ‘designated place for students to gather when arriving for library inductions.’ This is perhaps more applicable to smaller displays, which may be located close to enquiry and issue desks, and need less space overall.

These are fairly informal ways to communicate, but exhibitions can also be advertised through institutional routes, both print and electronic. Chelsea College of Art and Design ‘advertised the exhibition in university forums, including Arts London e-briefing, the main UAL news publication.’

Institutional publications can secure a wider readership than advertising produced purely through the library and may encourage greater liaison opportunities in the planning of future exhibitions. How you advertise is also important in raising the profile of your
library as being a proactive and innovative resource. At a Cardiff University exhibition of
student drawings, close liaison with relevant departments resulted in:

'Winners being photographed receiving their prizes by a colleague from the
University's in-house photographic team. This photograph, plus a scan of the
winner's drawing, some accompanying text and links to sponsors' websites,
was posted on the Library's and the Welsh School of Architecture's news pages.'

This was particularly significant at the University of Birmingham, which held its exhibition
within the Barber Institute and was therefore included in the Barber Institute's own
publicity:

'The exhibitions have benefited from featuring in the Barber Institute's regular
publicity literature and they have also been advertised in local papers, such
as the Birmingham Post, the Metro and in local events magazines.'

To attract external interest in local papers and arts magazines, it is useful to send out
press releases about your exhibition, particularly handy if the theme of your exhibition
lies in with a topical event or promotion. Use the institution’s own Press department if
available. Press releases should be succinct and easily digestible – if they are
successful, you will be able to elaborate at a later date.

In some cases, such as the Van Gogh Museum's Library, there may already be
departments with responsibilities for publicity, who will recognise opportunities for linking
with external campaigns:

'The exhibition was publicised in various ways: through the usual channels, that is
to say, the museum’s Department of Publicity and PR and the campaign to
promote Amsterdam as World Book Capital of 2008. Collaborating with the
World Book Capital organisation greatly increased the range of our publicity.'

External professional organisations can also be an important source of publicity through
conventional advertising and reviews, and also through notices and discussion lists. For
the art librarian, the obvious choice is ARLIS/UK & Ireland, but there are many other
library and archive organisations which could be used. This was an avenue followed
by the Van Gogh Museum library:

'Colleagues in the library sector were informed of the exhibition through the
programmes of their professional organisations and by means of notices posted
on various discussion platforms.'

Equally there are many specialist art organisations that both library and institutional staff
could use, depending on the content of the exhibition. While not all library staff will be
involved in arranging an exhibition, it is prudent to include all front-line staff in publicising
it. While they may not have in-depth knowledge of the exhibition's content, they should
be able to direct queries to the appropriate staff member and may have useful contacts.

Finally, but just as importantly, how do your users communicate with each other?
Word-of-mouth can be important for spreading good (or bad) reviews. Nowadays this
can mean both face to face and in online discussion groups. Holding focus groups
during the planning stages may alert you to any preconceptions your visitors hold
otherwise you may only hear why your exhibition made little impact at the evaluation
stage.

HANDLISTS AND GUIDES

In addition to general publicity detailing what, where, when and the general theme of
your exhibition, more detailed guides can also be used both to promote your exhibition
to users and to give them more background information. Bath Spa University suggests:

'Try to tie the exhibition in to your resources (e.g. provide a booklist of related
material). This is good publicity for the collection.'

Booklists can take a variety of forms. Simplest is a list of items on display, but consider
also a bibliography of related texts, maybe annotated by library staff, or a glossary of
useful terminology. For larger exhibitions it may be worth outsourcing their design, as
the University of Birmingham did, in order to present a professional image:
'Any publicity materials and handlists need to be ready in good time for printing and distribution. The same applies here in terms of accessible communication. The quality you’re seeking will determine the cost. The events leaflets of the Illuminating Faith project were designed by a graphic artist so we incurred additional costs, which I think were worth it, as they were very attractive.'

Birmingham Institute of Art and Design promoted London Fashion Week by providing information packs to support their display. These contained ‘fashion resources – promoted sources we subscribe to and our Fashion subject guide.’ This demonstrates how a new context can increase the take-up of existing promotional material.

As well as being distributed in print within the exhibition, booklists and guides can be sent by email to institutional staff, both to publicise your resources and allow them to refer back to the exhibition within their own teaching.

For larger exhibitions, an exhibition catalogue may be produced, providing information both on all the individual objects displayed and the more thematic material. If much of the material in your exhibition is text, consider simplifying the display and providing the text in a handout. As Melinda Davies remarks ‘text... doesn’t make for alluring displays, even if the content itself was quite interesting.’

THE VIRTUAL WORLD

Earlier there was a brief mention of the role of the library’s website in promoting your exhibition, with the conclusion that people have to visit it before it can be used as a tool for promotion. However it has a much more significant role in supporting and extending your exhibition online. This can range from online versions of exhibition texts and images of objects to more interactive elements such as surveys and quizzes. The websites of museums and art galleries are good models in this respect. Web 2.0 facilities like Flickr can also be used to create a virtual exhibition.

However, less labour intensive benefits of the web extend far beyond the library webpage, through links and online discussion. At Chelsea College of Art and Design websites related to the research project that the artist was affiliated to not only advertised the exhibition but offered images of the work and the video.'

Possible links include arts organisations, topical websites, artists and other professional organisations.

PROMOTIONAL EVENTS

Events run in conjunction with your exhibition are a good method of creating interest and building support among potential visitors. Launch events, receptions or private views need not be reserved for big exhibitions but can be as simple as inviting academic staff to a display of new acquisitions. For larger events, it may be possible to secure sponsorship to assist with costs.

Visitors may not be able to take in every facet of your exhibition when they visit. Guided tours allow library staff to present a personal interpretation of the exhibition. At the Van Gogh Museum exhibition ‘gallery tours attracted a mixed company of museum-goers and (art) book enthusiasts.’

For a more focused group, such as conference delegates, a more specialised thematic tour might be appropriate. There is also the option of allowing a more interactive approach, if items are not too delicate, and allowing them to handle certain objects under supervision.

Workshops, lectures and seminars related to the exhibition can be productive, especially if organised in liaison with other departments so that there is less pressure on library staff. At the University of Birmingham:

‘In at least one year the planning of workshops was a condition of funding. Although the workshops have not been well attended, there is great potential in developing a future programme of seminars and workshops to support the exhibitions to achieve more involvement both within the Art History department and other relevant disciplines on campus, such as History and English.’
This illustrates that events designed to promote your exhibition will themselves need their own publicity in order to be successful. Competitions and prize draws are another method of attracting attention. At the Birmingham Institute of Art and Design, a £20 MovieMail voucher and a DVD player were the first prizes in a draw to publicise the library’s London Fashion Week events:

‘I duly blu-tacked the prize result to a Victoria Street library wall. When the student who had won first prize came in, and having used the place, was eventually walking out of the library, I asked her if she had seen her name on the wall, and she hadn’t. But she was overjoyed to discover she had won, and all her friends nearby were supportive and congratulated her. Since I had helped her by encouraging her a week earlier to complete a draw ticket, I felt pleased myself that someone in one of the smaller libraries had struck lucky.’

Again, sponsorship may make prizes of this kind possible, although Cardiff University found that organising this for their architectural drawing competition did require a great deal of staff time:

‘Whilst ultimately productive, with Pennies from Heaven, Donhead Publishing and Thames and Hudson generously supplying books, the process of identifying suitable publishers, obtaining their support and ensuring they were updated about the competition developments was time-consuming.’

The museum and gallery worlds provide many more examples of promotional events, all of which can be adapted depending on your target audience and the scale of your exhibition. Some ideas to consider are worksheets, theatrical and music performances, themed film showings and handicraft workshops inspired by the exhibition – the only limits are your imagination.

**SUMMARY**

- Advertise previous and up and coming shows to heighten interest in the space and to illustrate how the space has been used previously.
- Never leave the space empty, as this can put off potential exhibitors. Always have something on display in quiet times for example new acquisitions, items from the special collections etc.
- Advertise the space as a bookable space.
- Have a waiting list so that if an artist pulls out you can display something else.

Methods of communicating with potential visitors include:

- Posters
- Handouts/flyers
- Email/mobile phone alerts
- Library website
- Social networking tools
- Highly visible location
- Institutional publications
- Local papers
- Professional journals
- Discussion lists
- Word-of-mouth

Supplementary material available at the exhibition can include a list of items on display, booklists drawn from the library collection, glossaries of terminology, interpretative guides and full exhibition catalogues.

Remember that everything available in print can be accessed also virtually.

- Launch events
- Receptions
- Private views
CASE STUDY 4: Student Proposals at Chelsea College of Art and Design Library

by Emily Glancy, Assistant Collection Development Librarian

Library members of staff organise regular exhibitions of library material as part of the ongoing promotion of collections at Chelsea College of Art and Design Library. Aside from these traditional library exhibitions, the library users are encouraged to see the library as an extension of the studio and as a site to engage with, perform in, or rearrange. Installations, displays and actions in the library space are actively welcomed by the library staff. These are arranged by the submission of exhibition proposals. These have been wide-ranging, including a number of exhibitions of students’ artists’ books and multiples, interactive and collaborative pieces that respond to the fabric and day to day workings of the library, a performance of screaming, bookshelves wrapped in sheets and a garden grown on the library terrace. The exhibitions proposals are open to all students from Foundation level to PhD. Members of university staff are also encouraged to use the library for exhibitions.

There is a proposal form for students to fill in that asks for details of the nature of the proposed work and the dates and duration of the exhibition. Further information such as location within the library space, provision of accompanying documentation, and special requirements or equipment needed are all addressed on the proposal form. An important aspect of the proposal form is that the student signs a disclaimer that allows the library to use images of the exhibition in future publications, which is very useful in terms of promoting the library and demonstrating its involvement with students beyond simply being a place of research activity.

The library keeps an exhibitions schedule of all the display cases and areas in the library to enable planning for exhibitions of library material as well as the student proposals. We have six display cases, a listening post and two LCD screens that can be used for showing video work. In addition, we consider
proposals involving any part of the library space and its fabric, including two outdoor terraces which are excellent spaces for large sculptural pieces. Using a planned schedule means that there is never an empty display case. The schedule is particularly useful at degree show time when the number of proposals usually increases. The schedule ensures that everything runs on time and allows for alternative exhibitions in the event of unforeseen changes.

When a proposal form is submitted the details are discussed between the student and library staff. In most cases it is possible to accommodate an exhibition. Installation and take-down dates are agreed and where necessary, the Librarian will supervise this (e.g. the unlocking of display cases or uploading of files to an LCD screen). Very few proposals are turned down. Those that have been unrealised have tended to involve equipment or arrangements that compromise health and safety regulations (for example the student who wanted to exhibit work based on the film Fahrenheit 451).

Copies of the proposal forms are archived with photographs of the installations, performances and events. Students who have produced artist books or multiples for display in the library often donate their work to the library at the end of their exhibition. In this way, the library benefits twofold; raising its profile in an alternative way amongst the user group and enhancing its Special Collections by having a record of current student practice. This in turn feeds into the User Education sessions held throughout the year, as students are always keen to see what their contemporaries have produced.

One proposal that was particularly successful was a collaborative piece of work by BA Fine Art student Claire Mookerjee called the Library Exhibition Terminal. Claire made a display cabinet with interchangeable features with an accompanying book trolley and advertised for six Chelsea students and staff to make work that could be exhibited on or in the cabinet. The book trolley provided the participants with reference texts and material used for research and to suggest to others certain ways of navigating the library space. The exhibition had a private view event during library opening hours and attracted interest from all library visitors. It was so successful that Claire used the exhibition terminal for her final degree show and invited a further six people to collaborate.

The most important aspects of the student proposal system at Chelsea are:

- Planning
- Documentation
- Promotion

The planning of the exhibitions is vital. This starts from the moment a student hands in a completed proposal form. Maintaining an up to date schedule of exhibitions makes the planning process straightforward. Documentation of the exhibitions means our activity within the college as a site for exhibiting is recorded and doesn’t go unnoticed. The archive of proposal forms and collection of photographs of exhibitions and events is a useful record for library staff to see what has been exhibited. This feeds back into our exhibition planning so that there is always variety within our own exhibitions of library material. The documentation goes hand-in-hand with promotion. We promote the current and forthcoming exhibitions and are able to use the documentation to promote the library to new students at the beginning of their course so that from the outset the library is seen as being more than a room full of books.

Emily Glancy
Assistant Collection Development Librarian
Chelsea College of Art and Design Library
Chapter 5 - Evaluating your exhibition

How do you evaluate the success of a library exhibition? While some of your audience may have avidly read every detail, others will drift through with no more than a casual glance. How do you decide whether all your work was worth it?

WHY EVALUATE?

The benefits of evaluating your work are threefold:

- Without some evaluation, however informal, you will be unable to determine how well your exhibition communicates with your audience.

- Effective exhibitions will have taken a great deal of staff time and money to plan, set-up and promote. Evaluation is important as a means of justifying that time and money to colleagues and superiors.

- Evaluation, especially when undertaken through a series of exhibitions, can improve you and your staff's performance the next time you create an exhibition and can contribute to their continuing professional development.

However there are many difficulties in providing effective evaluation, the foremost of which being how do you begin, as Bath Spa University discovered 'there were no difficulties in creating it but, after that, the problem of evaluation became apparent.'

WHAT WERE YOUR AIMS?

It is hard to decide whether an exhibition has been a success if the aims you hoped to achieve have not been clearly formulated in advance, as discussed in Chapter 1. While the content and focus of your exhibition should provide you with more specific aims, some general aims could be:

- Increase borrowing/use of collection
- Educate users
- Build relationship with users
- Raise profile within institution
- Raise institutional awareness

For example, one of Wimbledon College of Art's main aims was 'it validates that the library is supporting creative learning and strengthens the link between research and practice.'

Once aims have been established, they should be prioritised, which both aids the planning process and establishes the priorities for evaluation. Aims are not necessarily static. They should be reviewed during the exhibition to take advantage of the unexpected.

Certain aims, such as to increase borrowing or the number of visitors to Special Collections, are purely quantitative and are therefore easier to evaluate. If the number of books borrowed or appointments made rises, you can feel your exhibition has been a success. However, you should also take into account any other factors that may have influenced the result – have the students in an academic library, for example, reached the part of their course where they engage in research projects, and would the rise have occurred anyway?

Other aims, such as building relationships with users, can only be determined by more qualitative anecdotal evaluation, which, though more meaningful, can be harder to obtain. Again, your exhibition will only be part of the long term relationship and many other factors will affect it. Another problem is that evaluation normally only looks at immediate reactions to your exhibition. If any visitor realises how useful it was three months later, this won't be recorded.
GAINING VISITOR FEEDBACK

As already discussed, quantitative feedback is the easiest to record, as the University of Birmingham found that ‘the success of the exhibition is evaluated by sales of exhibition publications, [and] recorded numbers of visitors.’

Recording visitor numbers is, of course, only possible in a more formal exhibition setting or when viewing the exhibition is part of a larger event. An exhibition at London Metropolitan University was sited in the conference centre and led to conference delegates touring the library:

‘The conference centre exhibition was a success, with positive feedback from delegates. As part of breakout sessions delegates were offered the opportunity to visit the library, and many took up the offer.’

This emphasis on footfall is more difficult for smaller displays within the library, as was noted at Bath Spa University:

‘The only way was to take note of how many of the supplementary materials were taken. I produced a list of exhibits, and a bibliography from our stock on book design. Only 15 of these were taken, but we used no other methods of evaluation so we don’t know how many visited but didn’t take the written materials.’

If special events are organised as part of the exhibition, their popularity is also a good indicator of your exhibition’s success. London Metropolitan University ‘offered short sessions presenting some of the highlights of the samples to students and staff again with good take-up.’

The first barrier to a more qualitative response is that many visitors will be casual browsers, making it difficult to secure any feedback from them at all. Few of us would welcome a quiz on what we learnt after visiting an exhibition and none of the case studies offered by ARLIS members used formal visitor surveys as a means of securing feedback. The way forward seems to lie in offering opportunities for more informal user-led feedback, such as frequently occurs in the museum world – this was considered by Bath Spa University whose staff ‘noticed that galleries and museums have message boards next to exhibitions, and maybe this would be an idea for future displays.’

Here, is an example from Sonoma State University Library in Sonoma County, California, in which the staff describes the success of this approach:

13. Image of message board, Sonoma State University Library

‘We have an interactive bulletin board on the first floor of the library. It gets a lot of traffic because it is near an entrance and the bathrooms. Every three weeks I post a new discussion topic that is socially or academically related. It gets about 800 responses per semester and the sheets of paper have to be changed each week so participants have a blank sheet of paper to write on. Students and staff regularly stop to read the board and participate. The location is high traffic enough that the board is popular but a little out of the way so there is no traffic flow problem.’

This would provide an immediate response from visitors and also allow them to read each other’s responses. The same effect could be achieved through allowing visitors to post their comments on the library website, or through social networking tools, although here the response would be less immediate unless access is possible within the exhibition. In both cases, negative
feedback is just as possible as positive. If this is likely to be a problem, another alternative is a comments box or book, with feedback only being read by library staff.

Another possible source of feedback is the library enquiry desk. If visitors are inspired to ask further questions after seeing your exhibition, a log could be kept of the number and nature of these queries. This also has the advantage of further engaging all library staff in the exhibition, although it would be a matter of personal judgment whether an enquiry was exhibition-related or not.

CRITICAL FEEDBACK

There are many other sources of feedback in addition to actual exhibition visitors. The foremost of these should be your library staff, who will have noted any challenges or obstacles that have arisen during the course of the exhibition. A debriefing session once the exhibition has been cleared away could be combined with some social event to thank them for their hard work. Any changes they suggest could enrich future exhibitions. This was noted at Chelsea College of Art and Design’s exhibition ‘Quadrantes – Quadrants [which] was a very successful project … in terms of the curatorial process.’

Also useful is feedback by other librarians from outside your institution. It’s important to stress that you want an honest appraisal, as many of them will focus only on the positive aspects. This can be an informal discussion with a networking contact, who may gain ideas to take back to their own institution. Alternatively, contact the ARLIS/UK & Ireland Education and Professional Development Committee and suggest running a half day visit to see your exhibition. You’ll gain informal feedback on the day and the visit will also be written up in the ARLIS News-sheet, further publicising your exhibition and your library.

For academic libraries, liaison with academic staff can be invaluable in determining whether your exhibition input has made any appreciable difference to the quality of student work. They may also be able to pass on student comments made during tutorials and seminars relating to the exhibition, either informally or through a debriefing meeting. For non-academic libraries, institutional colleagues may fulfil the same function.

If promotional events have been organised as part of the exhibition, feedback from attendees should also be included. Here it may be possible to include a short written survey depending on the length of the event. Visitors to a full day conference will be more likely to fill in feedback forms than those attending a twenty minute talk on the exhibition highlights.

For larger exhibitions which hope for a public audience, media coverage is a key area of feedback. Much depends on your initial promotional efforts to attract media attention, but once in the public arena you have little control over how you are presented. The Van Gogh Museum’s library experienced very positive feedback:

‘Treasures from the library was mentioned in numerous professional journals and websites about books and book publishing … The national newspaper De Telegraaf published a detailed review full of praise for Treasures.’

It is useful to keep an archive of past exhibitions and audience reaction to them, both for the benefit of library staff and to assist the creators of new exhibitions. At Chelsea College of Art and Design:

‘Copies of the proposal forms are archived with photographs of the installations, performance and events. Students that have produced artists’ books or multiples for display in the library often donate their work to the library at the end of the exhibition … This in turn feeds into the User Education sessions held throughout the year, as students are always keen to see what their contemporaries have produced.’
'All art librarians should organise an exhibition at least once in their careers.'