

The Power of Artists' Books

Catalysts for Creative Thinking Across the Curriculum

While remote and hybrid learning experiences aren't new to higher education, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, we witnessed a more pervasive presence of these types of learning environments, which came with the potential for higher levels of disengagement among students. Even with in-person synchronous learning experiences, there seems to be a rise of students texting away or glazed over by a preponderance of PowerPoint slides. Students want and need to connect with one another and with course content in meaningful and innovative ways. Teaching and pedagogy literature abounds with examples looking for ways to engage students and create a sense of belonging.

Our advice is to advocate for the use of unique primary resources in the classroom. The use of primary source materials provides students with a hands-on, haptic experience, away from the screen or mobile electronic devices. When students work with primary sources, whether historical or contemporary, they make a connection with the artifact. In this article, we explore our use of one type of primary source material, artists' books, as a tool for student engagement.

About Artists' Books

If this medium of artists' books is new to you, you're not alone. One of the best definitions comes from the Smithsonian Libraries and Archives. In a blog post about their collection, the authors define an artist's book as:

A medium of artistic expression that uses the form or function of "book" as inspiration. It is the artistic initiative seen in the illustration, choice of materials, creation process, layout and design that makes it an art object. What truly makes an artist's book is the artist's intent, and artists have used the book as inspiration in a myriad of ways and techniques, from traditional to the experimental.¹

We might often think of primary sources as old, historical documents from an archive, but artists' books are a type of primary source sharing contemporary voices of artists and writers whose own work is often not part of the traditional scholarly publishing canon. They contribute to the concept of decolonizing traditional library collections by giving voice to often underrepresented communities. Using artists' books can help frame dialogue about difficult issues, reduce tension in the classroom, and serve as catalysts for conversation.

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Often, we use prompts like the following to begin conversation and exploration:

- What issues of identity are being explored?
- How is the book structured to engage the reader?
- What message is the creator trying to convey about the topic?
- How does the book make you feel about the topic?
- How would you describe the book to someone?

We have found that using prompts like these in the classroom helps provide an inroad for students to engage with these materials, which sometimes can be intimidating. Prompts can also help the student connect and engage with difficult or challenging themes and messages. As one student shared in a follow-up survey, “When using the format of [these] books as an alternative medium to express themes of social justice, it caused me to reflect on how this format is advantageous in causing the reader to be closely attuned to the artists’ message.”²

As librarians, we share a commitment to raising awareness about how artists’ books can impact and enhance the student learning experience. These kinds of materials can be used as artifacts to start meaningful discussions and ultimately to change the conversation. Whether at a liberal arts institution like the University of Puget Sound or at an R1 institution like Baylor University, our experiences in using artists’ books in the classroom share the common thread of increasing student engagement through reflection and conversation while also raising awareness of the impact of text and image working together to tell a story.

Artists’ Books at Baylor—Sha Towers

Each semester, librarians at Baylor University work with several sections of the Introduction to Art course, with 60 to 100 students in each section of the course. In these sections, we collaborated with professors Katie Larson, Jerolyn Morrison, and Heather White to design transformational educational experiences for students engaging with artists’ books. Because of the number of students in these sections, we tend to start with a book fair–style approach in large instructional spaces, incorporating 100 to 150 artists’ books at a time. This active learning experience in which students engage directly with the art objects contrasts with the more common, passive experience with intermediary representations of artworks (through textbooks and lecture slides) or even with firsthand experiences, such as art galleries and museums, where artwork is generally only observed visually and not intended to be handled by the viewer.

For these Introduction to Art sessions, we experiment with ways to create greater engagement and make space for students to think about and respond to their experiences. In these large sections, students are divided into small subgroups of five to eight students who rotate through stations, exploring different objects at each station and responding in writing to questions that serve as thinking prompts. Examples of the types of questions used include:

Select an artist’s book . . .

- . . . that you find meaningful or that speaks to you and reflect on why.
- . . . and reflect on the message the artist is trying to convey and how they chose to convey that message.
- . . . and discuss ways in which the artist drew on the elements of “book” or the “idea of the book.”



Students working in the Baylor University Libraries Arts & Special Collections Research Center Book Arts Collection.



Students working in the Baylor University Libraries Arts & Special Collections Research Center Book Arts Collection.

- . . . that challenged you or that you had trouble relating to (content, delivery, material, or other reasons) and discuss.

Providing all the questions in writing ahead of time had the unanticipated result of signaling to some students that the primary objective was the completion of the assignment—i.e., answering all the questions as promptly as possible, rather than the intended focus on exploration of the objects (and thus greater exposure to a wider variety of artistic interpretations and approaches to conveying the artist’s message). More recently, we’ve provided the students with a clipboard, pencil, and a blank sheet of paper with only numbers (representing the questions) and spaces marked out for written responses to questions that are revealed at specific intervals after students have had time to explore the artists’ books. We display each question as it’s revealed either on projection screens throughout the instruction space, on giant Post-Its placed around the room, on mobile whiteboards, and/or reading the questions aloud. We often invite students to share with the entire class a response either to something they’ve written about or other prompts such as “tell us about an artist’s book that you found really challenging or inspiring.”

In some variants of this experience, we ask the students in their small groups to work together on a response to writing prompts such as:

What has changed about your initial definitions or assumptions about artists’ books? What have you learned about artists’ books? How do these books change your perception of what can be considered art?

Your response should be at least 300 words and reflect on the group’s discussion.

In other variants, we’ve had groups select one artist’s book that they’ve explored and create memes or TikTok style videos that capture or reflect their experience with that work.

Artists’ books can also be used successfully to support and enhance non-arts courses, such as history, literature, sociology, social work, and medical humanities. For example, at Baylor, in a history course discussing the Atlantic slave trade, we introduced the students to several artists’ books that dealt with this topic in various ways, many of which had drawn on archival collections and primary sources as their inspiration. In literature courses, we’ve

used artists' books to showcase ways in which artists bring new approaches and insights to literary texts through various methods of printing and text design, combining with other art forms, and creative presentation. In medical humanities courses, artists' books explore artistic representation of the human condition and human expression, science, life, and mortality, providing an opportunity to pause and reflect on the complex layers of human interaction and emotion in the profession.

One example of this kind of collaboration is a partnership with history professor Felipe Hinojosa and his course on the Chicano Movement taking place during the spring 2024 term. As part of this course, students visited the book arts collection to explore work by Latinx artists and Latinx experience. Students also learned about zines, a “cousin of the artist's book,” as a medium for contemporary, democratized dissemination, and expression.³

Students then visited the library's makerspace to learn about materials, tools, design elements, and resources for creating their own zines about important figures and movements of the Chicano Movement. Over the course of the semester, students will meet with their subject librarian to learn about relevant resources for their background research and with experiential learning team members for zine-making workshops. At the completion of the project, we are inviting students to submit copies of their zines for inclusion in the library's book arts collection and to create an exhibit in the library about the students' research process, use of special collections resources, and their zines as creative manifestations of their scholarship.

Artists' Books at the University of Puget Sound—Jane Carlin

Artists' books can also serve as a medium to explore new ways of understanding and learning through collaboration. One such example is the exhibition “Science Stories,” a unique project that brought together Pacific Northwest scientists and book artists that resulted in the creation of engaging and unique artists' books that offer new ways to interpret science and to tell a story. The curatorial team was composed of Peter Wimberger, director of the Museum of Natural History at the University of Puget Sound; Lucia Harrison, retired professor of art from The Evergreen State College and board member of the Puget Sound Book Artists; and Jane Carlin, then-library director at Puget Sound.

Local artists whose work represented a strong connection with science and the environment were invited to participate and work with area scientists from The Evergreen State College, the University of Puget Sound, the University of Washington, Washington State University, the National Park Service, and Tacoma Public Utilities. In January 2020, just before the COVID-19 pandemic hit, artists, scientists, and curators met together at the University of Puget Sound Museum of Natural History for a “speed dating” event that provided the opportunity for participants to learn about the scientific research in our community. The artists and scientists rotated throughout the afternoon, learning from one another about their art and research and artifacts from the museum. As a result of this event, pairs were formed to



Materials in the University of Puget Sound Collins Library Book Arts Studio.



Puget Sound students working in the Book Arts Studio.



Puget Sound students working in the Book Arts Studio.

work together, and in addition, a few individual artists opted to work with an artifact from the museum on their own.

The principal goal of this project was to expand awareness of the scientific research and work being done in our local community and to provide a new way to raise awareness of their work and make the research more accessible to a broader audience. COVID-19 required us to modify our exhibition plans, but it also provided the opportunity to create a robust educational website that is available to the public. The exhibition website⁴ offers short videos from both the artist and the scientist as well as local resources. This exhibit also traveled to local venues, as well as Whitman College and The Evergreen State College.

A similar approach was used to coordinate the exhibition “Changing the Conversation,” which was held at the University of Puget Sound Collins Memorial Library and featured books that reflect social justice issues. Two members of the public were invited to serve as co-curators, along with librarians MalPina Chan, whose work reflects the Chinese American experience, and Carletta Carrington Wilson, an African American poet and fiber artist. The goal of the exhibition was to showcase how artists’ books can help change the conversation by promoting discussion about difficult issues and learning from personal narratives and stories of the artists who created them.

A final collaborative project designed to engage students and the community focused on the use of institutional archives as a source of inspiration as well as an opportunity to enhance library collections. Artists from the Tacoma community were invited to produce a bespoke artists’ book or work on paper that reflected the legacy of local artist and advocate Abby Williams Hill.⁵ Artists spent time examining sketchbooks, photos, diaries, and images produced by Hill as inspiration in developing a response to her life. These books were part of an exhibition titled “The World through Abby’s Eyes,” which also included original source material. As part of the exhibition, the library sponsored an event on International Women’s Day to showcase the work and encourage the university community to consider the influence of the artist and the changing social and cultural norms associated with women and social issues.

Additionally, Collins Library, in collaboration with many local book artists, offers an Introduction to Book Arts credit class that meets weekly for 90 minutes. In this class, students learn about special collections, letterpress printing, basic book design, and binding and have the opportunity to create their own books. Working with local artists offers a great

opportunity to collaborate and reduce the workload for library personnel. This class offers students—many with packed course schedules—a chance to explore their creative side in a less rigorous academic setting.

A course or assignment like this where students create their own artists' book offers a creative experience that is far more engaging than the standard research paper, although it still requires research and planning. An added benefit is that, in turn, campus libraries may exhibit such work, potentially adding such creative works of scholarship to their collections and including them in institutional repositories. Such paths offer students an important way to actively participate in the scholarly conversation along with highlighting them as authors and creators beyond the confines of the classroom and course assignments. These creative works can also serve as inspiration for future generations of students as they showcase the value of student research and creative works.

Conclusion

Artists' books in the classroom—and really in any setting where people can engage with them—provide rich opportunities to explore artistic expression and commentary. We are called to engage kinesthetically in this art, and through the works of these artists, we are called to be active participants in the unfolding of their voices and messages. Just as these artists challenge our notion of art and book, they also challenge us to think in new ways about ourselves and our world.

We encourage you to connect with your special collections librarians and explore what resources are available at your institution. If your institution does not have a collection, start one. You can also browse the sites of the College Book Arts Association (<https://www.collegebookart.org/>) as well as dealers' websites such as Vamp and Tramp, Booksellers (<http://www.vampandtramp.com/>); 23 Sandy (<https://23sandy.com/>); and Abecedarian Artists' Books (<https://abecedariangallery.com/>) to learn more. ❧

Notes

1. Smithsonian Libraries and Archives, "What Is an Artist's Book?" *UnBound* (blog), <https://blog.library.si.edu/blog/2012/06/01/what-is-an-artists-book/#.X5so4YhKg2w>.

2. Jane Carlin, "Changing the Conversation: Artists' Books, Zines and Broadides from the Collins Memorial Library Collection," *Sound Ideas*, Collins Library, University of Puget Sound, 2022, 40–41, https://soundideas.pugetsound.edu/faculty_pubs_library/1/.

3. The University of Texas at Austin's online library guide describes zines this way: "Commonly a small circulation publication of original or appropriated texts and images. More broadly, the term encompasses any self-published unique work of minority interest" with "roots in the informal, underground publications that focused on social and political activism in the '60s." "Zines at the UT Libraries," University of Texas Libraries, last updated September 8, 2023, <https://guides.lib.utexas.edu/zines>.

4. The University of Puget Sound, "Science Stories: A Collaboration of Book Artists and Scientists," accessed March 29, 2024, <https://blogs.pugetsound.edu/sciencestories/>.

5. Recommended related websites: "Digital Teaching Kit: Abby Williams Hill—Artist and Advocate," <https://library.pugetsound.edu/DTC-AbbyWilliamsHill>; "Abby Williams Hill Collection—University of Puget Sound," <https://library.pugetsound.edu/awh>.