

Bringing Art to the Library:

An Undergraduate Art Education Collaborative With the Curriculum Materials Center

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**Abstract**

In 2013, one Curriculum Materials Center (CMC) located in an academic library in Tennessee began to examine ways by which to increase awareness of its collection among students, faculty, and the greater community. The CMC director initiated an art display program on a prominent wall outside the library unit. Over the past two and a half years, the program has transformed from a marketing initiative into an instructional program for the university's College of Education students in which state K-12 standards and teaching pedagogy are emphasized. The art initiative has additionally changed from its inception by becoming a collaboration with undergraduate art education students.

This case study will discuss the goals, achievements, and evolution of the art initiative. Future directions of the program will be discussed, as well as implications for assessment.

*Keywords: Curriculum Materials Center, library marketing, undergraduate art education, library instruction, library outreach, K-12 education standards*

## **Bringing Art to the Library: An Undergraduate Art Education Collaborative With the Curriculum Materials Center**

Middle Tennessee State University, located in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, has a long history of preparing future K-12 teachers. Founded in 1911 as a state normal school, MTSU has evolved into a Carnegie Doctoral Research Intensive University with a diverse range of graduate and undergraduate programs. The lifeblood of the institution, however, is its undergraduate students: MTSU currently produces over 20,000 bachelor's degree recipients annually which statewide is second only to the University of Tennessee at Knoxville. The university's College of Education is a prominent campus unit, both for its role as a state leader in producing future teachers at the undergraduate level, as well as a source of higher learning for seasoned professionals who desire graduate degrees in education.

It is in this environment that the Womack Curriculum Collection, a unit of the campus' James E. Walker Library, was developed to support the information needs of College of Education students. Opened in 2004 with the advent of a new campus library building, the Curriculum Collection serves as a model school library as well as a resource for education students. The Collection is the state's sole textbook depository of K-12 textbooks under review and adoption; as such the library unit holds a copy of all public school textbooks adopted by the state, and makes them available for checkout to students and faculty. The Collection features a wide range of current fiction and non-fiction materials; it also maintains a historical view in its amassing of award-winning titles. Eleven different award winners, from the Batchelder to the Volunteer State awards, support instruction in specialized children's literature classes. A variety of curricular support materials, such as flipcharts, artwork, games, manipulatives, and teacher resource guides, round out the holdings of this special collection.

When the author became the director of the Curriculum Collection in the fall of 2013, it was as if someone had handed her the keys to a palace. Having previously worked as a public school librarian in

rural southwestern Virginia, the value of these holdings was readily apparent: the “real world” of working in a public school frequently leaves teachers with far fewer resources, as well as with materials which are often older and out-of-date. The surprising reality was that despite being well-stocked, the Collection (by all accounts) was not as widely used as it could be. Increasing awareness of the collection, for both current students and alumni, became a top priority: not only would pre-service teachers benefit from using the materials while MTSU students, but they could also access these materials as alumni. Better use of the collection could improve student competency at developing lesson plans aligned with state standards, a tough concept to master in a time of frequent changes to state K-12 accountability measures and policy. There were many obvious reasons to promote use of the Collection; the question was simply how?

Different marketing initiatives were considered, but one intriguing option was to make use of the large outside wall, composed of glass panes, which separated Curriculum from the rest of the library. The wall measured 7 ½ feet tall by 51 feet long and was visible from many points in the library, including the grand front atrium which opens four stories to the top floor of the library. Adequate hallway lighting was enhanced by the natural light coming in from the atrium. It was reasoned that art displays placed on this glass wall could be widely viewed from other points in the library and might draw foot traffic to the Collection. The hope was that by enticing library patrons to the art work, they would be inclined to come inside and discover the Collection’s holdings.

### **Phase One: Art Displays as Marketing**

Curriculum’s new marketing initiative left the discussion phase, and became reality, at the end of the Spring 2014 semester. An in-house artist was recruited to produce the art displays: a nighttime staff employee of the Collection was a graduate of the university’s art program, and had volunteered to

produce the pieces needed for displays. This nighttime shift was an ideal time to create art: the library unit was minimally used in the wee hours of the night, and our artist was happy to be productive during this time in using her talents for the betterment of the Collection. It was agreed that any art created for Curriculum would reside in the department permanently, as it was hoped that we could develop a stock reserve of displays for possible reuse in future exhibits. Art pieces would be laminated to protect their affixture to the glass wall, as well as to preserve them for future needs. It was also decided that decisions on creative direction would be a team approach among the Curriculum director, artist, and two other staff employees of the library unit; however it was understood that the final decision on displays remained between the unit director and the artist.

Deciding on a theme for the first display was a challenge in some respects because this was all so new: where to start? The director and staff agreed that a simple concept was best for the premier display, perhaps something that harkened back to grade school bulletin boards. But what could be used for materials? Our artist wanted to integrate discarded book jackets as repurposed art media, but certainly this would not be enough. Upon discussing the concept with the library dean, funds were graciously allocated to purchase eight rolls of different-colored bulletin board paper, as well as a heavy-duty rack on which to store the rolls.

With these materials at hand, our artist was ready to start on the simple theme of “Reading Makes Your Mind Bloom”. A simulated field of flowers sprouted up all along the glass wall. Flower petals and signage were cut out of the discarded book covers, yielding both color and textual variety to the pieces in the display. It was a modest but colorful and eye-catching departure from the bland glass wall. This display remained up during the summer of 2014, and was taken down before the start of the fall semester.

[Insert flowers.jpg]

*Figure 1.* Flowers from the premier art display. Images courtesy of Karen N. Reed.

The premier display was quickly followed by another which tied into a library-wide initiative: the library would be hosting an after-hours “Week of Welcome” party for incoming freshmen. The “Week of Welcome” party had a zombie theme, complete with zombie games and party foods. The Curriculum Collection joined in the fun by creating a zombie-themed art display: children’s literature character Flat Stanley was selected to transform into a zombie over three separate frames. In the first panel, Stanley appeared as a happy, energetic MTSU freshman; in the next panel (which represented mid-terms) Stanley had taken on a disheveled, run-down appearance. By the last panel Stanley’s transformation into a zombie (having reached the end of a tough first semester at college) was complete. Stanley was a hit with students coming into Curriculum, as judged by their comments to staff at the service point; and so after the “Week of Welcome” party concluded, the Flat Stanley display moved onto a bulletin board located inside Curriculum for a short-term period.

[Insert Flat Stanley.jpg]

*Figure 2.* Stanley morphs from college student to zombie in support of our “Week of Welcome” party. Images courtesy of Karen N. Reed.

### **Phase Two: Moving from Marketing to Instruction**

In planning the next large-scale display, which would be exhibited in the winter of 2014, the goal of the art displays began to evolve. It was apparent from student comments that they enjoyed the art displays; however it was recognized that the displays could be something much more. The Curriculum director and the library dean discussed the future of the project, and the consensus was that the artwork should be used not only to market the collection but as a means of instructing the students. There are many ways by which our library instructs students; however as a special collection catering to

the university's pre-service K-12 teachers, we decided to support College of Education curriculum rather than traditional library instruction. Our displays, therefore, would be selected to reinforce teaching pedagogy as well as proficiency with state K-12 educational standards, rather than the traditional library instruction goals of information literacy and familiarity with locating our online resources.

In deciding on the next art display, the Curriculum department agreed on a language arts theme which would spotlight a book held in the collection. Kate Messner's *Over and Under the Snow* was selected for its beautiful winter illustrations of animals as well as its narrative of hibernating animals. Our resident artist created panels based on several of the hibernating animals pictured in the book; these were intermingled with short passages from the story. This art installation deviated from prior displays in its focus on instruction: state K-12 standards which spoke to relevant language arts themes as well as science goals were included on panels. A brief descriptor explained that this was an example of an integrated curriculum lesson, in which more than one content area could be taught in the span of a single lesson. This installation remained up for the duration of the winter of 2014, and was removed as warm spring breezes started to envelope middle Tennessee.

[Insert Over and Under full panel.jpg]

*Figure 3:* Our art displays evolve into an instructional medium. Images courtesy of Karen N. Reed.

In selecting Messner's *Over and Under the Snow* as an example of an integrated curriculum lesson, we felt we were on the right track with the use of our art displays as a means of instruction. Rather than again focusing on integrated curriculum, however, the next art installation chose to go deep into one content area. An animal lover, our resident artist was interested in promoting animal life and nature; a theme of biodiversity was agreed upon as we found many state K-12 standards that this theme could promote. Our artist chose an ocean habitat and drew a coral reef complete with both animal and plant life. Animals ranged from tiny plankton to a large blue whale, and plant life was both colorful as

well as diverse. The entire art display was expansive as well as nuanced: when finally installed it provided the viewer with many interesting pieces on which to catch the eye. Along one side of the display, near the entrance to the Curriculum Collection, was a section on the state standards supported by this display. Standards were broken out by elementary, middle, and high school levels and clearly labeled accordingly.

[Insert Full panel biodiversity.jpg]

*Figure 4: Delving deep into the sea, as well as into science instruction. Images courtesy of Karen N. Reed*

With these last two art installations, we felt that our art initiative had matured into a respectable program. It was achieving our primary goal of bringing positive attention to the library unit, as well as marketing our unique purpose in the academic library. With the move into instruction and pedagogy support, we had taken a step forward in promoting our academic partnership with the College of Education. As we moved into the summer of 2015, we removed the biodiversity display and began to make plans for the late summer and early fall.

It is very difficult when one's great progress is suddenly derailed, and in June 2015 the Curriculum Collection was dealt a major blow. We were informed that we would be losing one staff position, specifically our evening employee who was our resident artist, with the start of the new fiscal year in July 2015. We were heartbroken to be losing a valued colleague as well as the engine behind our fantastic art initiative. We sadly packed up the last pieces of the art display and put them into storage. Without artistic talent in the department, it seemed that our experiment had come to an end.

### **Phase Three: Student Art Talent Saves the Day**



## ART EDUCATION COLLABORATIVE WITH THE CURRICULUM MATERIALS CENTER

Still reeling from the loss of our resident artist, the department had given up on future art displays as we headed into the fall of 2015. We immersed ourselves in the hectic pace which is back-to-school time; among many other tasks, for Curriculum this period involves the hiring and training of student employees. On one afternoon early in the semester, a special student applicant was directed to Curriculum to speak with the staff supervisor; like most students this young lady was looking for a simple job of shelving books and manning a service desk. Her fate, and that of Curriculum's, suddenly changed when the supervisor noticed the young lady's major as indicated on her application: art education! During her immediate and excited interview it was discovered that our applicant was a junior majoring in the art education specialty, for which she had already acquired experience creating small-scale educational art displays. She showed us samples from her online portfolio, and we hired her on the spot. The Curriculum art initiative was back in business!

At this writing, our art education student worker has been with us the full academic year, and plans to return in the fall of 2016. Over the course of a very full academic year, she created two extensive exhibits as well as a smaller third exhibit which tied into a library-wide initiative. The first exhibit was a piece featuring scenes of Colonial America, which tied into many state K-12 standards at the elementary and middle school levels. An accompanying arrangement of Curriculum materials focusing on this subject were set up on display shelving inside the entrance to the department. These books were available for checkout, and the staff replenished the area as library visitors removed items for their use.

The second exhibit was an impressive display dedicated to STEAM (science, technology, engineering, art, and math). Among the panels created as part of this exhibit were an extensive cathedral drawing, a panel explaining the workings of a pinhole camera, and a feature on Leonardo DaVinci. Our artist also took a great deal of care in creating panels which explained the focus on STEAM in the classroom. One innovation in this display was the use of QR codes printed on explanatory panels

which directed viewers to additional STEAM resources online. As with other displays, relevant books in the Collection were featured on our inside display shelving. Several of David Macaulay's books, such as *Cathedral: the Story of its Construction* and *Built to Last*, were prominently displayed and subsequently checked out by passing library visitors.

[Insert cathedral.jpg]

*Figure 5:* This cathedral was one eye-catching panel of our STEAM display. Images courtesy of Karen N. Reed.

The STEAM display was a particular favorite, however it was removed in time to join in a library-wide initiative. For February 2016, the different departments of Walker Library joined forces to support Black History Month through a variety of displays and programming. The Curriculum Collection saw an excellent opportunity to craft a display which would feature one of our award-winning book collections, the Coretta Scott King Awards. Our student artist created a beautiful portrait of Mrs. King, which hung proudly on the glass wall. The portrait was joined by descriptions of the award series as well as many colorful reproductions of award-winning book covers from the series. A selection of CSK winners were displayed on the shelving located near the entrance, including many works by Walter Dean Myers.

[Insert CSK.jpg]

*Figure 6:* The Coretta Scott King Awards were prominently featured in a February 2016 art display. Images courtesy of Karen N. Reed.

In working with our art education student this past academic year, we held onto the carefully cultivated mission of the program: the art displays remained a means of departmental marketing as well as an instructional support for the College of Education. A few things changed this past year, however: the project became more of a collaboration between the art education student and the Curriculum director, with the director yielding a great deal of artistic control to our student artist. This shift was possible because the art displays directly correlated with our student's studies: she understood how to

locate state K-12 standards, and she had experience employing the standards through her coursework. Our student artist quickly became attuned to the needs of the department, and required minimal oversight from the director. This creative freedom yielded benefits, as our student brought new innovations (such as the use of QR codes in displays) as well as a fresh outlook. The success of this academic year has helped us consider our future direction.

#### **Phase Four: The Road Ahead**

The employment of our art education student was a serendipitous experience in that we were able to revive a successful initiative; it was also scary. We essentially put the fate of a beloved program in the hands of someone who will, by design, leave us at some point. What will happen when our student graduates? Our student will have a fantastic portfolio of work to show prospective employers; she will have also benefitted from working in a department geared directly toward her field, which has assuredly complemented her studies. The program, on the other hand, will suffer from the loss of yet another talented young artist. It is in the best interest of the Curriculum Collection that we seek a permanent solution to our need for a resident artist.

The department is currently working to establish a formal relationship with the Art Education program at our university. We are seeking funding from our library dean to support a permanent internship so that we can always have a student artist in-house who can continue the art display initiative. Our experience this year has taught us that undergraduate students in the Art Education program are a valuable resource, and a partnership with this academic program would provide a mutually beneficial experience.

With a formal internship program, however, comes greater responsibility. Our program will include a means of student assessment by which goals for art projects will be set on a semester basis.

Assessment of student art is a difficult process at best; many authors have documented the difficulty of adequately measuring success in a subjective field such as the arts (Colwell, 2004; Boughton, 2005). One answer cited by many experts in the field is the use of qualitative assessment measures such as portfolios. In his article "From fine art to visual culture: Assessment and the changing role of art education", Boughton (2005) described the components of a good art portfolio. He wrote about the importance of assembling a body of work collected over time, complete with open-ended student reflections about each piece or project. Boughton also made an important distinction between artist portfolios, which are intended to project a specific professional persona, versus educational portfolios: "The purpose of educational portfolios...is to promote the students' knowledge of their own progress, and support their ability to demonstrate independence in researching and evolving their own projects." (Boughton, 2005, pp. 219). This perspective demonstrates the values which resonated with our experience this past academic year in working with our student artist: we gave her a high degree of freedom in researching her topics for the art installations, as well as the accompanying K-12 standards. This autonomy allowed her to grow both personally and professionally, which is the whole goal of university studies. Therefore, we see an internship, as measured by an end-of-semester portfolio assessment, as an exciting means of furthering student education.

Assessment will not be limited to our student artists, however; it is also important to measure the success of the art initiative itself. While it is difficult to quantitatively measure the impact of a visual art display on student engagement, we have some ideas. Each art display incorporates relevant physical holdings drawn from our collection: these items are exhibited on a tall bookshelf at the entrance to the Curriculum Collection. Students often remove these prominently displayed materials for check out. One assessment, therefore, could be to check our circulation records and compare each item's check out before and after inclusion in the display. At our academic library, where circulation of physical materials has steadily trended downward, an uptick in departmental circulation is always a goal. Another

assessment idea includes the use of short printed student surveys at our service point, near the entrance of Curriculum. The ability to gather students' thoughts regarding the art displays would be very helpful: do these displays affect student perceptions regarding the mission of the library unit? Do the displays effectively support our unit's academic goals? Do they create a more inviting environment in which to study and conduct research? Any information which might shed light on these concerns, as gleaned through a short student survey, could be very beneficial to our long-term planning.

Another future innovation planned for our department is to incorporate art exhibits into our online presence. The webpage for our department (<http://library.mtsu.edu/curriculum.php>) is currently being revamped to hold far greater content than the prior webpage; doing so will allow us to further our original marketing objectives for the department as well as take our instruction to a new level. We will be featuring future art exhibits online through photo documentation of each panel; from there the online exhibition will include links to relevant lesson plans, state K-12 standards, specific library resources which support the display's theme, and links to other supporting web resources. In putting our art exhibits online, we hope to increase our access to our prime audience of College of Education students. We are particularly concerned about students in our university's graduate Library Science program, a degree which is entirely online; this is an audience who may not enter the library often, and therefore could benefit from the greater access afforded by the online content.

## **Conclusion**

Creating a sustainable art display initiative for our special collection has been a work in progress, and we have learned a great deal along the way. The program has grown from a simple marketing idea into an two-fold instructional program: first, as a support for our core audience of College of Education students, and secondly as a valuable work experience by which undergraduate Art Education students

## ART EDUCATION COLLABORATIVE WITH THE CURRICULUM MATERIALS CENTER

can put their coursework into practice. Our future plans will allow us to formalize the program through student and departmental assessments, as well as market our department to a wider audience through our online presence.

Although the art displays are a low-tech concept in an age of ever-present digitization, we feel it is precisely this approach which is needed to provide a warm, friendly environment in a library of glass, tile, and steel. Providing something of beauty is always welcome, and based on student comments we know our art displays are enjoyed. It has taken a series of twists and turns, but we think we have finally figured out the formula for bringing art to our library.

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