

Storytelling in a Digital Age: Connecting Our Communities and Collections Using Exhibits

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NEW SLIDE: Acknowledgement of Country

[Amy] We wish to first recognize that we are the guests living on lands represented by Native Nations whose sovereignty, governance, and treaty lands existed long before the state of Nebraska. These Nations include the Omaha, Ponca, Santee, Ho-Chunk or Winnebago, Lakota, Pawnee, Cheyenne, Arapahoe, Otoe-Missouria, Ioway, Kaw, Sac and Fox or Mesquakie, Kickapoo, and Delaware Nations.

Thank YOU for coming and WELCOME.

[Both] Introduce ourselves; pronouns

NEW SLIDE: Warm-up

[Amy] Warm-up:

Whether you are just digging in to exhibits or have been in the display trenches for years, there's always something we can learn from the work of others.

1. How many displays or exhibits have you curated? At least 1? At least 10? Around 20? Around 40?
2. Did you choose to do displays? Or, were exhibits another "duty as assigned" or a part of your job that you were not looking for or thinking about?
3. Who here had someone show them how to curate a display before their first display vs. who was just asked to create a display?
4. What type of institutions does everyone work at? Public library, academic library, school library, government library, corporate library, special library?

Disclaimers:

[Lori] We are two archivists working in an academic library and while we both have internship and early career experiences working in other settings (presidential library & museum, corporate, government), we are academic archivists.

[Amy] Also, we are fortunate at UNO Libraries to have some pretty amazing librarian colleagues who are doing great work with book displays. We do some work with books as they are part of our archives and special collections - and we think what we have to share today translates to book displays too - but much of our specific examples and experiences will relate to our work with displays of archival materials.

NEW SLIDE: Roadmap

[Lori] Roadmap

Connecting:

[Lori] Our overall goal for the exhibits we create – whether they are pop-up exhibits for events/special occasions, in-library exhibits, have digital or media elements or not, or online through Omeka.net – is to tell stories drawn from our collections that are meaningful to our audiences. *We want people to connect personally with collections.*

[Lori]

1. Why is this important?

- We want to connect people's relation to objects to a repository's mission.
- We want people to understand why we save things in general.
- We want to show our collections are relevant to people's lives. They can relate to something happening currently.

[Lori] For me personally, two times came quickly to mind when I thought about what I've connected with at a library, archives, museum. I remember visiting the Holocaust Museum the summer of 1994. Walking down a hallway, I saw a huge pile of shoes worn by men, women, and children murdered by the Nazis. It was a gut punch. I also remember seeing Dorothy's shoes in the National Museum of American History. I grew up in Kansas City; we had a tornado shelter in our house; we had drills multiple times a year at school; I used to play "tornado" in the yard with friends; you can see the connection. Aside from brief delight at seeing THE SHOES from the Wizard of Oz, the shoes brought back those memories from childhood. We're not all going to have things that visceral or iconic in our collections, but we all have objects or documents that are meaningful to members of our different communities.

[Amy] I remember visiting the Robert S. Moton Museum in Prince Edward County, Virginia after hearing about it from a former student and being brought to a full-stop by the temperature and noises in the recreated classroom visitors entered. The museum is the site of the 1951 student strike led by 16-year old Barbara Johns, which led to 3/4s of the plaintiffs in the five cases that were combined for the Brown v. Board of Education decision. The classroom was noticeably colder with air movement and noise recreating wind coming in through the classroom's exterior walls. There were other noises too of chalk on a chalkboard and rattling that did a great deal to give visitors some sense of what it must have been like for the African American students and teachers forced to learn and teach in that unequal school.

[Amy]

2. TO AUDIENCE: Does anyone have such a memory they would like to share? What have you seen at an archives, library, museum, or similar space that left an impression?

[Lori]

3. Amy and I thought we'd give a few examples of ways we've seen people connect with someone at our own repository. I have a few to share. For a symposium which brought a lot of Vietnam veterans to campus, we exhibited items from Hagel's military service--including parts of his uniform--and I saw an older gentleman in a Navy hat looking intently down into the exhibit. I also saw across the lobby a couple visitors flicking through pictures of young Hagel in uniform, on top of an Armored Personnel Carrier, in camp, etc., on our large touchscreen.

NEW SLIDE: September 2001

Second: Hagel was BUSY as a Senator, and so were his staff, so we showed this with an Omeka exhibit of his daily schedules. Without staff developing and constantly refining these schedules, following up with folks, handling logistics, Hagel wouldn't have gone much of anywhere or done much of anything. When people who used to work for Hagel visited us during an open house, I watched as a number of them diligently navigated this exhibit on a big screen, reminiscing about their years of hard work.

NEW SLIDE: Hagel + Kids

Third: People connect with pictures of cute kids. So I've sought them out in the Hagel collection. Here we have Hagel sitting at a desk surrounded by students. I love it b/c he was visiting the school to talk with educators about a policy...but also so he could have lunch with a class. Clearly, he's enjoying himself. I hope people have noticed it in one of our online exhibits; when we had it on physical display, I saw people point to it more than once. These other two have also been on display and well received, especially this one taken from the back.

NEW SLIDE: Gifford pics

[Amy] We did a display of the work of Emmy Gifford, the founder and long-time costume designer from the local children's theatre. On one of the final days of the exhibit, a couple very purposefully came in for a visit and studied the drawings, fabric samples, photographs, and programs. Their sharing of memories about Emmy Gifford and children's theater productions from 30-50 years ago shifted to other local performing arts organizations and I was able to share information about Opera Omaha and other material in the archives that they were also connected to.

Inviting/Including:

[Amy]

We want to highlight a variety of voices in our collections. If there's an issue with the content of our collections not quite matching the diversity we'd like to see, there are some tactics we can try.

1. Inviting community members to partner on a display. Let people tell their own stories.

There are many ways to let people tell their own stories. We can have someone tell their own story by using things already in our collections such as an oral history or other interview. Using excerpts from their writings whether a personal writing like a diary or letter or something written with the intention that it would be public or published is another option. But, what do we do when we want people to tell their stories and our collection doesn't include those voices? We talk to our community partners and if we don't already have a community partner, then we do what we do all the time and make that connection. With community partner displays, I think it is great if it can be a partnership where you are displaying something from the collection as a companion to the material from the community partner. In our current LGBTQ+ History Month exhibit, we've included the memories of Terry Sweeney, the donor of two banners used in marches, as the label text for those two items.

NEW SLIDE: Omaha Stories

[Still Amy] When we started a legacy Omaha oral history project that will eventually include an online exhibit, I pretty quickly realized that while we had a sizeable number of interviews with Native Americans, most non-white voices were not represented in the collection. To address this we are doing two things. First, we held a public talk by educator, archivist, and oral historian Jade Rogers who talked about her personal and professional research and gathering of oral history interviews, primarily in Omaha's African American community. Secondly, we are developing the Omaha Stories website, which will be home to UNO's Omaha oral histories and will open to hosting interviews from other local repositories in 2019. We are reaching out to Omaha's cultural heritage repositories to better share a fuller picture of Omaha.

There is also 1A: *Being told* you have to partner with an organization or person on a display. Let's say - just for example - someone in this room was told by the big, big boss, your boss' boss outside of the library, that the library needed to partner with a particular community organization on a display. In our case, the library wasn't even the first choice for this partnership, but we knew we were the best equipped within the organization to not only create a display, but to make sure the materials belonging to this organizer were only on temporary loan, were properly cared for, and were returned to the organization in a timely manner. I was feeling a certain way about this display and then I was fed a humility salad when within minutes of finishing the installation of the first case I saw students walk over to look at the objects that had been loaned by the community organization. Now, it may be because some of the items were larger, 3D objects than we often display on the main library floor or they may have had a personal connection to this organization's mission that I hadn't thought about in advance. I don't know, but it made me reflect on that particular interaction. And the students immediately checking out the display also gave me something nice to mention in the thank you note I sent to the organization.

NEW SLIDE: Carla Ruiz quote

And what about 1B: *Being invited* to loan your material (or reproductions) to another repository for their display. We were asked by the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts to bring local trans voices from the Queer Omaha Archives to display alongside the artwork of Canadian American trans artist Cassils. We did this in two ways. The first was by including excerpts from oral history interviews on the gallery wall, so visitors could learn part of the stories of Nebraskans Carla Ruiz and Ashley Swarz directly from these women. For this, we had to listen to the interviews (which were brand new!) and after listening created transcriptions for a couple sections we liked. We brought another dimension or perception of someone's story from the archives to the display by loaning archival boxes that replicated the size and number of boxes that hold the personal papers of Dr. Meredith Bacon. The boxes gave visitors not only a sense of the size of Bacon's personal papers, but I'd like to think they could inspire some thinking about the what is and is not contained in those boxes.

[Lori]

2. Finding new voices among your current collections.

If you were to look at my collection, the Hagel Archives, at the surface, you'd think it's about the life of an older, white, wealthy male politician. But, looking at several of the online Omeka exhibits, hopefully you'll "see" the voices of several different constituencies in Nebraska—veterans, Native Americans, farmers. More broadly, the Hagel collection is about all those people who came into contact with Senator Hagel or his few dozen staff members. It's about anyone who has visited, called, or wrote to his office b/c

they worried how a piece of legislation would affect a loved one. It's about anyone who spoke with Hagel on the campaign trail with their worries over the direction of the country. It's about anyone who contacted Hagel b/c they needed help with something. So, if any of you have ever done any of these things, your voice is probably in a collection or two as well. And, this is cool, earlier this week, a first-year composition class was in the Archives to start the research for their final project and Amy always tells classes a little something about Hagel because it is our largest collection, but also because we have a portrait of him in the reading room. The students noticeably reacted and became more engaged when she explained that the collection includes constituent mail and information about programs at their school, like grant funding that helped in the creation of OLLAS (Office of Latino and Latin American Studies).

Sharing Examples:

[Lori]

I think it's fair to say that a lot of what we've both learned about putting together exhibits comes from experience, watching what others do, and gathering ideas from colleagues. So let's share some of that, shall we? Here are some of our lessons learned:

NEW SLIDE: Black velvet platforms

- Use what you have.
 - [Lori] You don't always need fancy archival backing board. Sometimes cardboard wrapped in paper works just fine.
 - [Lori] You don't always need a fancy (and expensive) acrylic exhibit platform. Sometimes two boxes covered in a cloth make a handsome platform. If the visitors to your exhibit can't see it, and you're not hurting the items, go for it.

NEW SLIDE: Omeka.net Plans

- [Amy] Similarly, in the digital world, you don't need to be a wiz at technology and able to pull off all the bells and whistles. An out of the box solution with simple formatting and a handful of add-ons can produce functional and nice-looking online exhibits. Is there a platform being used by your institution that you could use for exhibits? Maybe. Do you want to use it? Maybe!? Here's information about the subscription plans for exhibit builder Omeka.net.

[Lori] These next three count for both physical and online exhibits.

- [Lori] Don't overcrowd! The eye needs white space. Overcrowding is overwhelming for viewers. You want people to take in and/or read what IS there. This is where curating comes into play. What items do you need to tell the story/guide a theme, and what do you just personally like and you're trying to shoehorn it in?

NEW SLIDE: Hagel Campaign Case

- [Lori] Also important to note: sometimes you can break this rule! There are exceptions!
- [Amy] Text takes longer than you think to craft. You're going for interesting but efficient, so you're finessing and getting down to the essential story or information you're trying to convey. This takes time! In the museum world especially, you hear about a technique to cull text, both

spoken or written. Take an item and write 200 words conveying what is important and interesting about it. Now cut it to 150. Now cut it to 75. You can do this with word count or seconds and use the cut-offs you want. The point is to go further than you think is reasonable or possible. It's probably very possible.

2 NEW SLIDES: Maps

- [Lori] Visual impact is important. For example, bring in the color. If the items don't provide it, find it or create it elsewhere to accompany the items. This could be in the way you present the text on the label, or with background color such as paper or cloth, or with non-archival props. Maps are also striking and plenty of people like looking at them. A variety of document and object types also helps improve the visual punch. [Specifically point to two types of maps.]

Okay, these next ones are for physical exhibits.

3 NEW SLIDES: Book displays, Hagel displays, March shirts

- [Lori] Play with depth and dimension. Don't have all flat items. Prop things up. Put items at different heights. Bring some items forward, some items back. [Specifically point to 3 slides as they go by.]
- [Lori] Don't skimp on the text size. What font size can a shorter person or someone in a wheelchair reasonably read, for example? We try to stick with 20 or higher. On an extremely related note, this is another reason that spare prose is an asset.
- [Amy] Useful display items: mirrors to show off more than one side of an object, cosmetic sponges flexible in more than one sense, corners, push pins, mylar, dress form.

[Amy]

TO AUDIENCE "Would anyone like to share their own idea or lesson learned?"

NEW SLIDE: Countdown

Assessment:

[Amy]

You can spend a lot of time on exhibits, more than you might think. We've learned this just from a few months of keeping metrics on it. What are you getting out of it? How is it benefitting you?

[Amy] 1. If you can count something, do it!

- numbers at a reception or event
- comments : left in a guestbook, email, in passing at desk, received in person at a pop-up
- (In "You may be happier not knowing" options:) Track how many hours staff spend on researching, choosing items to display, writing & editing labels, preparing and installing objects, publicizing, and de-installing a display. We are tracking for just this fiscal year and so far we've spent: 8 (McCain & Hagel), 5 (Alumni Center), 60 (Hagel), 14 (Voting and campaigning), LGBTQ History Month (35), ASH (20). That's an average of 9 hours per display for small, low-interpretation displays and 38 for larger, more research-intensive displays.

[Lori] 2. Another type of assessment--Exhibit talk back:

- Post-it notes work well for quick assessments from a group.
- Use a whiteboard. Students at our university seem to love them.
- Use a large notepad. [Lori's note: for an exhibit on natural disasters, I set up a large notepad in the gallery to ask people to leave their memories of Hurricane Hugo—best interaction ever. 25 years had passed, so trauma had lessened.]
- For temporary comments/interactions, use a Buddha Board. This allows someone to make a comment/drawing that will disappear after the water dries. A colleague used this as an interactive element for a display on a sensitive topic. This meant we couldn't capture the comments, but it did give a bit of interactivity to the display.

[Lori] 3. Finally, another area of assessment is impact stories:

- [Lori] During a pop-up exhibit—with digital components--at an event filled with people from Hagel's hometown, I took in two donations (of material). After another pop-up exhibit for the Hagel collection, I took in four donations. Basically, if you're trying to connect with a specific audience, take exhibits on the road to where you know those people will be. Event organizers might welcome someone who wants to come in – for free – and help jazz up the place.
- [Amy] Retired criminal justice professor Sam Walker was in the library and found our exhibit about the 1968 merger of Omaha U with UNL to create the NU System interesting. He offered to donate a related piece of memorabilia. After I sent a thank you, he stopped by to chat, which led to more donations on other anti-war activism and the preservation of historic architecture downtown, and then some more donations, and more expected in the future. A student may interview him for a class project. His most recent accession is photos of the October 1969 Vietnam War Moratorium protest in Omaha. So not only did the exhibit about the 1968 merger give us new donations, but it also birthed an exhibit for 2019.
- “Go forth boldly and exhibit!”

New Slide: The End/Homer