

Otis Assessment, Research and Scholarship Grant Report
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The purpose of my OARS grant was to devise assessment tools to measure engagement and the impact of exposure to the Otis Collection of Artists' Books on students enrolled in the Spring 2017 Book Making Projects class and the successful completion of their own artists' book editions.

I have taught the Book Making Project class since Spring 2012. As a project class, the majority of the semester is dedicated to the production of an original artists' book in an edition of 5 copies. As a practicing book artist, I know what a challenge it is to produce an edition of handmade books, let alone making it happen in only 15 weeks. Students must work quickly to develop the idea and form in order to leave enough time to design, write, print and bind their book works. They also need to consider what can be achieved over the course of a semester and not be overly ambitious.

Although there have been truly stellar projects along the way, I have been disappointed by a lack of commitment to content development, planning and process in many of the final projects. I went into the Spring 2017 class wanting to try a different approach in teaching and assessing progress in an effort to improve the overall outcome.

Tools for Assessment

A questionnaire that the students filled out while viewing collection items
A rubric was used to help assess engagement and progress throughout the semester
End of semester reflective writing exercise

The Class

COMD 456—Bookmaking Projects

A culmination of the skills and techniques used in letterpress printing, typographic design, and edition bookmaking using both lead type, digital plate-making, printmaking processes and Risograph. Through model making and testing, students combine conceptual skills and printing technique in the artists' bookwork tradition. Course projects involve the integration of text and image, paper selection, inks and inking, color, serial imaging, surface preparation, and press editions.

Prerequisites:

COMD362—Introduction to Letterpress

From metal type to hand-carved plates, students experience the traditional disciplines of typography, letterpress, and printing while learning to integrate type and image, structure and content, process and product. Students work in the Lab Press, which boasts a large collection of wood and metal type, and Vandercook printing presses.

COMD365—Book Structures

This course introduces the skills, craft, materials, process, and techniques used in making book structures and boxes. Students learn binding methods involving paper folding, cutting, sewing,

gluing, and other means of assembling individual sheets, signatures and text blocks with or without covers.

All book arts classes are held in the Otis Lab Press.

Otis Laboratory Press is a fully functioning letterpress studio with four Vandercook proof presses and over 200 fonts. Established in 1984 by Sheila de Bretteville as part of the Communication Arts Department, the LabPress has a rich history of small edition book publishing, introducing generations of students to the origins of typography and the notion of the book as a visual communications medium. Conceived as a laboratory for aesthetic exploration and a place for practical production, the LabPress is an integral part of the graphic design curriculum. It provides a key link between traditional tools and digital media. Students actively participate and produce award-winning books that have become a permanent part of rare book collections throughout Southern California and beyond.¹

Book Making Projects (COMD 456) is an elective offered through the Communication Arts Department. The class is available to students in all departments although the Spring 2017 class was seniors and one junior majoring in Graphic Design and Illustration. All had completed the prerequisite classes, Introduction to Letterpress (COMD362) and Book Structures (COMD365), which I also teach. They have demonstrated experience in edition letterpress printing and the binding of books, though few had a clear idea of what an artists' book is.

“An artists' book is a harmonious composite of design, form, content, and context with no one area dominating or responsible for the bulk of intended message. The overlapping of form, materials and content is quite often the major vehicle for creative expression.”²

“An artist's book is 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. A book that *only* contains text is simply a book, even if it is authored by an artist ... 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 experimental. The book could be made through fine press printing or hand-crafted, the pages illustrated with computer-generated images or cheap photocopies; books become sculptures, tiny and gargantuan; books were sliced up and reconfigured, made from all kinds of materials with unconventional objects incorporated in unique or limited editions, or produced in multiple copies. With all sorts of ideas behind them, artists continue to challenge the idea, content and structure of the traditional book.”³

With this in mind, I always show artists' books from the Otis Collection of Artists' Books to the class at the beginning of the semester.

¹ <http://www.otis.edu/laboratory-press>

² Darryl Baird, “Definition of the Artist's Book; What is a Book; BSO's (Book Shaped Objects); Art vs. Craft.” A Discussion held on the BookArts-L listserv, March 1998.

³ Evenhaugen, Anne, “What is an artist's book?” *Unbound* (<https://blog.si.edu>), Smithsonian Libraries, June, 2012.

Short History of the Artists' Books Collection at Otis

Artists' books are exceptionally varied and creative by their very nature. The complex medium employs the book, in any of its various guises (scroll, codex, fold-out or single sheet boxed, to name but a few forms of books) as an original work of art. They usually integrate the formal means of conception and production with aesthetic or thematic aspects. Artists' books are considered unique works of art in one-of-a-kind or small edition multiples. Some now are mass produced. The variety of its form makes the artist book difficult to define. The twentieth century witnessed particularly varied and creative experimentation with artists' books culminating with an expansion of the medium in the '60 and '70s. California became a center of production.

The collection of artists' books at Otis College of Art and Design began and grew significantly during this period due largely to the efforts of librarian Joan Hugo, a recognized expert in artists' books. The Otis Library's current collection is approximately 2,300 works. Among the holdings are books by important contemporary artists such as Ed Ruscha and Joseph Beuys as well as work by recent graduates of MFA programs in the book arts such as Sarah Bryant and Daniel Mellis.

The collection also includes books made by Otis students in the Laboratory Press, which was begun by Sheila de Bretteville, Chair of the Communication Design and Illustration Department at Otis/Parsons from 1980-1990. Susan King, Simon Toparovsky, Cynthia Marsh, Rebecca Chamlee, Carolee Campbell and Katherine Ng, all important book artists, were among the faculty over the years. This is a unique collection of books, often produced in small editions of 2 to 5, with particularly good examples of innovative structures, excellent typography, and interesting content.

The goal of the Otis Artists' Book Collection is not to create a comprehensive archive, but rather to provide a valuable teaching resource available to artists and students. Since the collection is available on only a limited basis, providing access to the books via an online image database is a continuing project, one that we hope will assist those with interest in researching our collection as well as the medium in general.⁴

Each semester, I ask Cathy Chambers, the cataloging librarian in the Millard Sheets Library responsible for the Otis Artists' Book Collection, to bring a variety of examples from the collection to the Lab for the students to handle and examine, hoping to seduce them purely by the power and beauty of the objects as pieces of art. I use my familiarity with the books and the artists who made them to emphasize the ways that process and form support concept and content. During the "Show and Tell" session students are free to pick up whatever book interests them.

The work tables in the lab are cleared and covered with fresh white paper before the books are laid out. Students are cautioned to take great care when handling these often valuable and fragile materials, and are required to use only pencil if taking notes. Although most artists' books invite the reader to touch and interact, students are sometimes intimidated or confused by them.

The "Speed Dating" Questionnaire

Hoping to encourage students to engage more freely with the collection's material, Cathy Chambers suggested an idea she had recently developed.

⁴ www.otis.edu/library/short-history-artists-books-collection-otis

“Speed Dating with Artists’ Books is something I came across in my reading last summer as I was researching ways to bring archives and Special Collections material into the classroom.⁵ I thought it would be particularly appropriate to try with the Writing in the Digital Age Foundation classes because artists making books use narration so uniquely. With Jean-Marie’s encouragement, I crafted the questions and we introduced the session during the fall semester. Response was generally positive and down-right enthusiastic as far as the faculty were concerned so I think we’ll continue to make it available to WITDA sections every year.

“The article discussed the use of medieval manuscripts and documents with undergraduate medieval history students attending Merton College. I adapted the idea for artists’ books, expanding the series of questions I’d posed for students in Guy Bennett’s History of the Book class.

“It seems to help focus attention to a greater extent than in the show & tell sessions, where students browse at will.”⁶

Cathy and I worked together to revise the questionnaire which had originally been designed for use in LAS classes to make it more relevant to my studio class.

On the first day of the Spring 2017 Book Making Projects class we met in the Otis Lab Press as usual for the course introduction along with the goals and objectives for the semester. Then the students were directed to meet in the Millard Sheets Library with Cathy Chambers and look at artists’ books in the Otis collection.

Because one copy of the students’ edition would become part of the collection at the end of the semester I hoped that meeting in the library rather than in the Lab would impress on them what an honor that would be.

After Cathy explained reading room etiquette and rules, she gave a short talk on the history of artists’ books and the Otis Collection. Twenty-three artists’ books, including two made by students in previous Book Making Projects classes, had been placed around the room. The students were then told that they would be given five minutes with each item, doing their best to determine the information requested on the questionnaire. Every five minutes they would be asked to move to another station, until each student had a chance to examine a number of books. (See Appendix 1 - Speed Dating Questionnaire)

In addition to the visit to the library on the first day of class, the students were invited to a hands-on event May 1, 2017 in the library to see a selection of books from Vamp & Tramp Booksellers that were available for inclusion in the Otis collection. The students were given an additional opportunity to handle artists’ books and the opportunity to participate in the shaping of the collection by voting on which books they thought should be selected for purchase.

⁵ Walworth, Julia. “Oxford University: ‘Speed-dating’ in Special Collections: A Case Study.” *Past or Portal? Enhancing Undergraduate Learning through Special Collections and Archives*, edited by Eleanor Mitchell, Peggy Seiden, and Suzy Taraba, 30-34. Chicago, Ill.: The Association of College and Research Libraries, a division of the American Library Association, 2012.

⁶ Cathy L. Chambers, “Re: Speed Dating.” Message to Rebecca Chamlee, May 15, 2017. E-mail.

Evaluating the Questionnaires

The progression of depth and the variety of the questions posed to the students served to make them look more closely at the work in a variety of ways. Often when shown the pieces in the collection in the past they would only consider the surface of the work, its look and style, saying, “I like it,” without really knowing why. The questions helped lead them to see the maker’s intention and to recognize why the book form was chosen.

Examples:

In response to question 5, book 2, *The Fortune Teller* by Malini Gupta: “How do the materials effect your experience?” The student answered, “It made me feel like I was holding something special and religious that should be respected and handled with care.”

In response to question 5, book 4, *Riverine* by Small Advisory Press: “Why do you think the artist choose the book form for this work?” The student answered, “It’s a hands-on experience, as well as quirky, that lets you get ‘down and dirty’ like people that live battures. A book, but also pushed in its form, like batture dwellings.”

In response to question 5, book 3, *The Fortune Teller* by Malini Gupta: “Does the structure of the piece affect the way you read the book or the impact it has on you?” The student answered, “When you open the box, it’s like it blooms. Then the structure is not a box anymore because the sides of the box are not glued.”

In response to question 6, book 1, *To the Extend of* by Sigrid Calon: “Did you find it easy to ‘read’ or gain an early impression of this book?” The student answered, “Sort of. I realized early that it was not a narrative, but couldn’t figure the meaning of the images until the last page.”

In response to question 5, book 3, *Spinning: A Record of Life in Queens* by Gail Watson: “Does the structure of the piece affect the way you read the book or the impact it has on you?” The student answered, “Yes, I would hear the songs in my head as I read the text.”

In response to question 5, book 4, *Maneater* by Hannah Batsel: “Why do you think the artist chose the book form for this work?” The student answered, “So that we would understand that each secret was important on its own but added to the greater whole.”

Constructing the Rubric

Previously, I have used limited rubrics (without clearly defined levels of performance) and my profession judgement to keep track of requirements, assess my students learning outcomes and help with grading.

Using the Otis website's rubric resources as a guide⁷ I developed a new rubric for Spring 2017 Book Making Projects that provided an overview of the entire semester's requirements and learning objectives that I hoped would provide a clear-cut way for the class to understand my intent in evaluating student achievement. (see Appendix 2 - Book Making Projects Rubric)

The assessment criteria that I chose provided a list of project objectives that also included answering the questions during the library visit and the reflective writing exercise. I have always used a number system from 4–1 to score levels of performance attributes but in the new rubric the scale included descriptors. Creating clear descriptions of performance levels for each criterion made it possible for me and my students to see where they were excelling and areas where they needed to improve. The rubric greatest strength was how easy it was for the students to understand.

Reflective Writing Exercise

The reflective writing exercise I asked the students to complete at the conclusion of the semester offered them an opportunity to reflect upon and write about their experience visiting the Otis Book Arts Collection and its value to the process and completion of their artists' book editions. My aim was that through reflection, students could discover how the experience with the collections influenced the development and outcome of their final project.

“Reflection is the reconsideration of an idea or experience. Consciousness, retrospection, introspection, and self-knowledge are facets of the reflective act.”⁸

Unbeknownst to me prior to my OARS research, reflective writing has been a requirement in LAS classes for the past six years with students writing end of the semester reflections in their eportfolios.⁹ Which would explain why the students, to my surprise, carried out the writing assignment without comment or complaint.

Examples:

“When we as a class were able to go down to the library and look at those handmade artists' books I was cautious at first because I generally am not excited or inspired by what I consider

⁷ “What Is a Rubric and Why Should I Bother to Use One?” “A Guide to Designing a Killer Rubric”
<http://www.otis.edu/rubrics>

Rohrbach, Stacie, *Educational Assessment in Emerging Areas of Design: Toward the Development of a Systematic Framework Based on a Study of Rubrics*, Sheffield Hallam University

⁸ Quayle, Moura and Paterson, Douglas, “Techniques for Encouraging Reflection in Design” *Journal of Architectural Education* (1984-) Vol. 42, No. 2 (Winter, 1989), pp. 30-42

⁹ Giuntini, Dr. Parme, “Otis Assessment, Research and Scholarship Grant Narrative,” April 20, 2016

traditional handmade books. However, after going down and looking at all of variations and the unique types and styles of books that the library had brought out I have to admit I was very intrigued and inspired. I remember doing my write-up on this one book that didn't even have a binding and it was more of a deck of cards being held together by this beautiful box...I love that these books, in the structure, in the format, in the construction were completely non-traditional like I was expecting to see. Not seeing traditional books when we went to the library allowed me to feel confident in exploring this idea that I had of creating not just poetry books that people flip through and read but poetry books that are non-traditional books that people are able to experience what the poem is about more than just being able to read without taking time to think about the message and what my work is talking about."

—Bryce Fisher, senior graphic design

"When Book Making Projects began in January 2017, I had no idea what I wanted to make. I was excited to make something, but I needed context and inspiration. The visit to see the Otis Artists' Book Collection was that much-needed spark that got my mind generating ideas for my own project.

"Being a senior in graphic design, my brain was still stuck on the idea of a classic book as it related to design work, which often mean a structured set of ideas with distinct design elements (title page, contents, page numbers, etc.). But the books at the Otis Library were, for the most part, free of such constraints. Each book was unique, and each was built on a specific concept. I loved seeing the different sizes, shapes, paper types, illustrations and typography in each one. I especially enjoyed seeing the fortune cookie book, which is such an untraditional "book," as well as the carefully constructed, more traditional-looking books. It was also very helpful to see the students' books and how much they could accomplish in the time we were given.

"After seeing all of the different styles and concepts, I was able to consider my own project. I allowed myself to choose a subject matter that means a lot to me—cooking and memories—because I saw how special a book could be if the artist invests thought, time and energy in it."

—Hana O'Regan, senior graphic design

"This collection is unique and should continue to be shared with all that are interested. Bookmaking is such a specific niche in the arts and these projects really helped develop the appreciation for the craft and art work that went into them. Personally, I was fascinated with each book. I love to see how they are made and how the concept plays into the structure. The unique and personal content of each book also acts as a window into the artist's mind. They are expressions manifested through book arts.

"The visit we took as a class to the Otis Artists' Book Collection inspired me to begin thinking about what I wanted my own book to be about and had me questioning if I even wanted it in "book form." Some books were origami pieces, some had moving parts and many were not even shaped like books. These exciting takes on book arts inspired me to think outside the box about what I wanted to create."

—Sofia Olivas, senior illustration

“Initially I was unsure what ‘artist books’ truly meant. Seeing the artists’ books in the library not only provided clarity but gave me ideas on what to do for my book. It was very beneficial to see the options we had for our books. I think if we hadn’t gone, I would have continued to feel uncertain about what to do... Overall, I would say that it was a great addition to the class and a necessary one.”

—Rissa Martinez, senior advertising

“I am grateful to have seen so many possibilities in structures, because I know the meaning of what a “book” is can be left up to interpretation. Seeing all the different structures also allowed me to understand that an artist’s book is not just content, but form. And that the presentation of it also means something.”

—Stephanie Lopez, junior illustration

“Going into Bookmaking Projects, I wasn’t sure what to expect; when tasked with the assignment of making an artist’s book, the visit to the library to see the artists’ book collection, especially so early on, was enormously helpful. Before the visit, I didn’t have a firm grasp of what an artist’s book was exactly (aside from assumptions based on the combination of the two words). I also had a limited scope of what an artist’s book could be. The visit helped with that.

“Ed Ruscha’s *Twenty-Six Gasoline Stations* stands out in particular. I like that it has a sense of mystery to it. At a quick glance, it seemed like a random collection of gasoline stations. Yet, as the viewer/reader, whether or not you know or discover the explanation, you can assume that it’s the artist who connects these seemingly random gasoline stations somehow. It traces a journey for Ruscha. So, from that book, the idea of telling a travel narrative appealed to me. Suzanne Lacy’s *Rape Is* also had an effect in that it showed me that the form of the book can reflect the content within.”

—Paul Gip, senior illustration

The common theme in the students’ reflections was going in not knowing what to expect or having misconceptions about what an artist’s book could be. It can be seen in the students’ writing that viewing the collection opened them up to countless possibilities, dispelled misunderstanding and shattered self-imposed limitations.

Although the reflective writing exercises are harder to substantiate, the students’ writing clearly showed the impact the visit to the library had on their process and projects. More than anything it provided evidence that they connected strongly with the collection and saw its value to their own work.

Conclusion

The final presentations of the students’ work took place the last week of class with visitors from the library and the Lab staff in attendance. I had been along for the ride over the course of the semester and had seen the hard work and care that had gone into the work. I was not prepared, however, for the astounding quality of the books and the pride the students showed in their presentations. The

final projects from Spring semester of Book Making Projects was easily the most realized and successful of any of the classes I'd taught before. It was a wonderful class of talented and hard-working students that made my job as their instructor a fulfilling experience.

I consider the class a great success, far surpassing the results from previous semesters. The tools and strategies developed in response to my OARS grant research enhanced my ability to teach more effectively and give my students clear and meaningful knowledge of my expectations.

And I have the rubric to prove it.

ARTISTS' BOOKS SPEED-DATING SESSION

Bok Making Projects

January 2017

BOOK 1

1. If this work has a title, write it down.
2. Write down the name(s) of the creator(s).
3. Is there a publisher or press name given? Write it down.
4. What is the edition size (how many were printed or produced)?
5. Where in the book did you find the title, creator(s), publisher / press, and edition information?
6. Did you find it easy to 'read' or gain an early impression of this book?
7. What about the book, if anything, drew you in?

BOOK 2

1. Write down the book's title, creator(s), and publisher / press.
2. Where did you find the information?
3. Describe the book in your own words, noting the materials, the printing method, image reproduction, binding style, and any other techniques used in its creation.
4. Is there any description given of techniques and materials in the book itself?
5. How would different materials affect your experience?

ARTISTS' BOOKS SPEED-DATING SESSION

Bok Making Projects

January 2017

BOOK 3

1. Write down the book's title, creator(s), and publisher / press.
2. Where did you find the information?
3. Is there any description of the binding and/or printing technique?
4. Where might you go to find out how to make a similar structure?
5. Does the structure of the piece (particularly if it's a nontraditional structure) affect the way you read the book or the impact it has on you?

BOOK 4

1. Write down the book's title, creator(s), and publisher / press.
2. Where did you find the information?
3. What do you think the artist intended with this work?
4. Is the "bookness" of the piece relevant to the artist's theme or message?
5. Why do you think the artist choose the book form for this work?

Appendix 2 - Book Making Projects Rubric

BOOK MAKING PROJECTS RUBRIC				STUDENT:	
	CRITERIA				SCORE
	4	3	2	1	
Artists' Book Speed Dating Questionnaire	Answers showed thoughtful consideration and a genuine effort to understand and examine the book objects.	Answers showed some consideration and effort to examine and understand the book objects.	Answers showed minimal consideration and effort to examine the book objects.	Answers showed little consideration and only a cursory effort to examine the book objects.	
Project Content Development	Planned carefully, presented multiple ideas, showed an advanced awareness of the process	Adequate planning, presented several ideas, showed a understanding of the process.	Showed a lack of planning and little evidence that the overall process was considered.	No evidence of planning, student did the minimum work required.	
Project Time Management	Class time was used wisely. Much consideration went into the planning and design of the work. Student was self-motivated, seeking assistance as needed.	Class time was used wisely. Some time went into the planning and design of the work. Student sometimes needed to refocus.	Class time was not utilized fully. Little time went into the planning and design of the work. The student was sometimes distracted or off task.	Class time was not used wisely. Little effort went into the work. Student was not focused on the project.	
Project Craftsmanship	All aspects of the project were considered and patiently completed. The finished project was a result of careful and meticulous planning. The craftsmanship was outstanding.	With more effort in finishing techniques, the project could be outstanding. Overall the project was well produced.	The project showed average craftsmanship, minor defects were present.	Below average craftsmanship, lack of pride in the finished project. Showed little effort and lack of understanding of the process.	
Project Execution and Creativity	The project was successfully executed from concept to completion, with a novel and original approach.	The project was successfully executed from concept to completion. Unique and original.	The project was partially successful in execution, with few unique aspects.	The project was never fully completed and / or highly derivative.	
Reflective Writing Exercise	Demonstrated a conscious and thorough effort. Represented the student's ideas and conclusions accurately, fairly and eloquently.	Demonstrated a thoughtful effort. Represented the student's ideas and conclusions accurately.	Demonstrated a basic effort. Represented the student's ideas and conclusions accurately but lacked clarity.	Demonstrated a limited effort. The student's ideas and conclusions were not in evidence.	
Total					