Soviet Counterculture, Poison Girls, and Glue Sticks

Teaching Information Literacy with Do-It-Yourself Zines

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Introduction

With the current climate in higher education focusing on preparing students for a competitive postcollege job market, faculty have been increasingly interested in finding alternative writing assignments that incorporate traditional academic skills while at the same time allowing for elements of real-world writing and creativity. Instructors, and especially faculty teaching in first-year or writing-in-the-discipline programs, are introducing assignments that involve different types of outputs, including podcasts, blog posts, or short videos. The goal of these assignments is to teach students how to distill big, scholarly ideas into smaller manageable deliverables that may be typical of the kind of communication they would create outside of the classroom.

Instruction librarians are also increasingly incorporating alternative ideas on how to teach information literacy inside and outside of the classroom. The Association of College and Research Libraries' (ACRL) *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* provides threshold concepts identified as crucial for a student's academic success.[1] The conceptual nature of the *Framework* frees librarians to think more creatively about the ways in which students engage with information literacy. Library sessions that incorporate elements of active learning allow librarians and faculty partners to dynamically engage students in acquiring the skills needed to become successful, informed citizens.

At George Washington University (GW) Libraries and Academic Innovation, the authors conducted a zine workshop that combines the concepts taught in a traditional library session with learning to communicate creatively for a specific audience—skills that faculty are incorporating into course assignments. The Do-It-Yourself Zine Workshop was held during spring semester 2019 at the Eckles Library on the Mount Vernon Campus of GW, a library that focuses on serving undergraduates. The goal was to highlight materials from the Special Collections Research Center while also providing a creative opportunity for students to make their own zines. Students were provided with pens, pencils, scissors, old magazines to cut up, and instructions on how to make an eight-page zine by folding one piece of paper. The workshop was not related to a specific class, but focused on community building and, additionally, spoke to elements of the ACRL *Framework*.

This chapter will discuss the Do-It-Yourself Zine Workshop as it pertains to a greater understanding of alternative research assignments and how artistic exploration can go hand-in-hand with information literacy. The authors will argue that the creation of zines uniquely allows students to recognize authority as constructed and contextual; information creation as a process; and scholarship as conversation.

History of Zines and the Zine Collection

A zine, short for *fanzine*, is a do-it-yourself publication usually made on paper and reproduced via photocopier or printer. These self publications are associated with sub- or counterltures and stem from a desire to share knowledge among marginalized groups.[2] Growing out of the sci-fi fanzine trend of the 1930s and 40s, the evolution of zine culture mirrored the rise of social activism in the 1960s as groups sought affordable means to distribute political ideas.[3] By the 1970s and 80s, zines became especially prominent within punk rock subcultures around the world. As desktop publishing technology and photocopying became increasingly accessible in the 1990s, individuals used the zine as an expressive medium. V. Vale, an alternative publisher, briefly explained this phenomenon in the 1996 collection *Zines! Vol. 1*:

> Techniques of collage and detournement occur quite naturally to anyone armed with scissors, glue stick, a pen and a sense of humor. With few resources, one can puncture a million-dollar ad campaign; lampoon a political candidate or mock a $10,000 Calvin Klein billboard

with a 10-cent sticker. Many zines, in fact, contain stickers to encourage activism. And with today's widespread access to a home computer and Photoshop software, no image is safe from a seamless act of sacrilege.[4]

GW Libraries' collection of zines reflects the abundance of punk counterculture zines produced in the latter part of the twentieth century. The majority of GW's zines (approximately 250 zines representing 140 titles) are held within the university's International Counterculture Archive which "has the goal of collecting multimedia materials produced by, or dealing with, countercultural groups and movements of different countries,"[5] with a particular focus on the former Soviet Union, Eastern Europe and the Balkans, and Washington, DC. This collection was curated by Dr. Mark Yoffe, who seeded it through collecting visits to the former Soviet Union in the 1990s, under the aegis of the Library of Congress. These zines were later transferred to GW Libraries in the form of high-quality copies, and more items were collected over time. Most recently, GW's Special Collections Research Center acquired a full run of the mid-1970s British punk band Poison Girls' *Impossible Dream*, a zine the band created to sell at performances or by mail order.[6]

According to Yoffe, punk zines of the late 1970s and 80s share a common aesthetic, which, after originating in Britain with titles like *Sniffin' Glue* and *Sideburns*, spread to punk subcultures around the world. The characteristics of this style—mirroring the style of punk music—were stripped down, minimalist, rough, and misshapen, with crude black and white copies of photos, cut out magazine letters, and text created on broken typewriters. The words themselves matched the aesthetic, focusing on self-expression and embracing obscenity. This accidental-looking, DIY effect signaled a type of authenticity that those in the counterculture saw lacking in dominant cultural forms.[7]

Zines have grown in popularity among marginalized groups, particularly due to their do-it-yourself mechanics, allowance for anonymity, and possibility for production that bypasses the publishing industry. For example, zinesters of color and within the queer youth of color community have produced zines as both a site of protest and an antidote to the "lack of diversity in cultural output,"[8] as Melanie Ramdarshan Bold and Tomás Boatwright explore in their studies of the POC Zines Project and Flux Zine, respectively.[9]

While many zines—especially those produced in the late twentieth century—were originally created as ephemeral objects for small audiences or in-groups, zines have perhaps unexpectedly found longevity in library and archives collections. Activities such as a DIY zine workshop can help activate these collections, allowing students to engage with them as sites of learning and inquiry.

Literature Review

A review of the literature revealed that while scholarship exists regarding zine creation and the teaching of rhetoric, as well as regarding zine collections within libraries, a gap exists where these two ideas are considered in tandem. One article that attempts this discussion is Susan Thomas's "Zines for Teaching: A Survey of Pedagogy and Implications for Academic Librarians."[10] While this article discusses the use of library zine collections

in rhetorical instruction, the focus is on alerting librarians to how faculty use zines as a pedagogical tool; while elements of the ACRL *Framework* may be included in the ways professors teach with zines, that fact is merely coincidental, as Thomas does not specifically discuss the *Framework*.

Zines and the Teaching of Rhetoric

Several articles discuss how faculty, particularly those who teach writing, use zines to convey principles of rhetoric. Rebekah Buchanan provides the historical context of zines, placing them in a continuum that includes Martin Luther's Ninety-Five Theses and science fiction magazines of the 1930s in her article "Zines in the Classroom: Reading Culture."[11] She offers examples of how to introduce zines to language arts classrooms, provides an example rubric for a zine analysis activity, and discusses how to use zines to introduce concepts of biography and autobiography. However, she mostly focuses on adolescents rather than collegiate classrooms. Tobi Jacobi also focuses on adolescent writers and autobiography in her article "The Zine Project: Innovation or Oxymoron?"[12] and couches composition within a frame of community and civic engagement. She discusses a collaborative project between college students and juvenile participants in the Boys and Girls Club that featured underlying principles involved in democratizing literacy. She writes: "Zines demonstrate a critical literacy in which writers are more than passive consumers of social expectations and late capitalism, more than quiet participants in traditional school curricula increasingly driven by test scores and contextually empty/ignorant mandates."[13] Similarly, Silvia Vong discusses how zines offer a method of reflection for student writers in her article "Reporting or Reconstructing? The Zine as a Medium for Reflecting on Research Experiences."[14]

Zines and Library Collections

Scholarship from the standpoint of Special Collections librarianship and archives discusses particular zine collections and the methods used to establish them. In "Grrrl Zines in the Library," Jenna Freedman discusses the collection of women's studies zines she curates at Barnard College;[15] "Fill a Void: The DC Punk and Indie Fanzine Collection at the University of Maryland," by John Davis, similarly describes the process and creation of this archive.[16] One article, Robin Potter and Alycia Sellie's "Zines in the Classroom: Critical Librarianship and Participatory Collections," does make the connection between using zines as tools to teach critical thinking and the importance of developing collections that challenge traditional authoritative notions of publishing.[17] Additionally, librarians and archivists from institutions such as Vassar, Texas A&M, Duke, and others have described zines within university archives and special collections.[18]

Zines and Cultural Literacy

Less scholarship exists regarding the use of zines to promote cultural literacy. Amanda C. R. Clark and Alexis Paperman's "Seeing Is Reading: Visual and Cultural Literacy through Zines and Artists' Books" discusses a project at Whitworth University Library in which students were tasked with purchasing, with library funds, zines and artists' books from

bookstores in the Pacific Northwest in order to curate a representative collection of diverse experiences: "At a micro level the zine literacy of the students charged with these tasks increased, and on a macro level, the cultural literacy of the greater community was increased by exposure to the items on display."[19] Anna Poletti's "Self-Publishing in the Global and Local: Situating Life Writing in Zines" also discusses the intellectual and cultural connections zines provide for both creator and reader:

> By establishing participatory communities which seek to erase the distinction between those who consume and those who produce culture, people involved in these activities feel more connected to their culture of choice (whether it be independent electronic music, zines, or independent media), and less harassed by the demands of consumer culture.[20]

While literature about the teaching of rhetoric discusses the use of zines from a pedagogical standpoint, library literature mostly focuses on collecting zines. This presents an opportunity to talk about zines as a pedagogical tool for instruction librarians. The subsequent section will describe the mechanics of the zine workshop and how it served as a venue for information literacy instruction, particularly as it pertains to the ACRL *Framework*.

Anatomy of a Zine Workshop

The idea to conduct a zine workshop was initiated by a committee tasked with conducting outreach for the Eckles Library at the George Washington University's Mount Vernon campus. This library primarily houses first-year students and is home to special programs such as the Women's Leadership Program and other "living and learning" communities.[21] The University Writing Program (UWP) is also based on the Mount Vernon campus, and all first-year writing classes are conducted there. Spaces on "the Vern" are notoriously underutilized, and a goal of the committee was to entice students from the main campus on Foggy Bottom to visit Eckles. The outreach team sought to create programming that would showcase GW Libraries' zine collection while also attracting students interested in participating in a creative project. In addition to social media and poster promotion, we asked our writing faculty partners in the UWP to promote the zine workshop to their students, who tend to vacate the campus immediately after the conclusion of classes.

For the workshop, we brought a selection of zines from GW's collection for students to examine and use as inspiration for creating their own works. The full run of the Poison Girls' *Impossible Dream* zine and examples from the Counterculture Archive collection were displayed, including historic British zines such as *Sniffin' Glue* and *Sideburns* (the well-known issue including the three-chord schematic graph and "now form a band"), as well as some less well-known American and Soviet zines. Mark Yoffe, who selected the zines for display, introduced students to the collection. Although his part in the workshop was originally conceived as a presentation to be done before the DIY component, the workshop evolved naturally as students arrived in waves; instead of a presentation, each student perused the historical zines at their leisure, asking questions or exploring them at their own pace.

After familiarizing themselves with the zines, students were invited to create their own. We provided art supplies such as pens, pencils, crayons, glue, tape, magazines, and scissors and projected instructions on how to create a zine from an 8.5 × 11-inch sheet of paper on the classroom's screen.[22] Assistance in creating the eight-page zine form, as well as photocopying completed zines, was provided as needed. During the workshop, students creatively transformed the provided materials into unique zines while socializing with friends. Students' zines revealed active engagement with the historical materials, riffing on their phrases, emulating their aesthetic, and mirroring their exploration of identity and counterculture.

We found that the students were especially attracted to the physical, tactile quality of zine making, in an era when so much time and cultural production is experienced on a screen. The ability to create a zine to share among a small group or even destroy at a later date is compelling in contrast to the uncontrolled sharing, relative permanence, and potential for surveillance of outputs such as social media. In addition, zine making can function as a community-building activity, as they are oftentimes created collaboratively, with one person perhaps cutting up magazine pages while another cuts and staples folded paper.[23] Beyond these benefits, zine making aligns with the dispositions described in the ACRL *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*, as described below.

Learning Outcomes and the ACRL *Framework*

While this workshop was not tied to a specific course or imminent assignments, we still considered the ACRL *Framework* in our planning. As instruction librarians, our work with the faculty and students in the University Writing Program informed the learning outcomes for the zine workshop. All students at George Washington University are required to take University Writing 1020, a first-year course teaching aspects of academic research and writing. The template for this course explains that it "…focuses on framing important questions, constructing an argument through identifying and discussing both supportive and contradictory evidence, accommodating a variety of purposes and audiences, and using the ideas of other writers appropriately."[24] Through our work while being embedded in sections of these classes, we realized we could connect the tasks involved with zine creation to three of the frames of ACRL's *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*: Authority Is Constructed and Contextual, Information Creation as a Process, and Scholarship as Conversation.[25]

ACRL Frame Authority Is Constructed and Contextual

The nature of zines places their creators in a position of central authority. Zine writers typically focus on personal experience, centering themselves as the expert within the context of an experience. At the workshop, students were inspired by the personal nature of the stories told in the zines and couched their own experiences in similar terms. For

example, one student was inspired by the chord schematic in *Sideburns*, incorporating the image into his own band's origin story, the topic of his zine. While his zine told his own personal story, he was able to link it thematically to another author's observations. Another student looked through fashion magazines for images that could speak to her experience of being South Asian. Both of these workshop participants understood the context of their source material and deployed it in ways that made sense according to their own points of view.

According to the *Framework*,

> Information resources reflect their creators' expertise and credibility, and are evaluated based on the information need and the context in which the information will be used. Authority is constructed in that various communities may recognize different types of authority. It is contextual in that the information need may help to determine the level of authority required.[26]

The zine workshop provided a unique experience for students to link the idea of their participation with what they created to the practice of understanding how authority manifests in different types of sources, whether it be formal and scholarly or informal and colloquial. The dispositions for understanding the contextual and constructed aspects of authority require scholars to think about how authority is conceived and to recognize that expertise may take on different forms depending on the nature of what is being discussed. By analyzing the process of zine creation, the student can conceive of authority as being subjective; it can be bestowed upon the writer themselves, as an expert in their own experience. It allows them "to question traditional notions of granting authority and recognize the value of diverse ideas and worldviews."[27]

ACRL Frame Information Creation as a Process

One of the draws to the zine workshop was the ability for students to create their own content. Most writing opportunities at the undergraduate level involve responding to texts provided by instructors, performing proof that they understand the basic concepts of their disciplines. Students may get to do original writing and research only at the graduate level; therefore, the ability to realize information creation as a process may be a unique experience. The ACRL frame Information Creation as Process states: "Information in any format is produced to convey a message and is shared via a selected delivery method. The iterative processes of researching, creating, revising, and disseminating information vary, and the resulting product reflects these differences."[28]

Students at the workshop were able to develop an understanding of the information creation process in several ways. First, they were limited to the size of the zine, since participants were working with one sheet of 8.5 × 11-inch paper that was folded into eight 4 × 2.75-inch sections—a rather small canvas for text or images. This required students to think about how to make their messages powerful yet succinct and confront the choices to include or exclude information, to "develop, in their own creation processes,

an understanding that their choices impact the purposes for which the information product will be used and the message it conveys."[29]

Even if a student's writing mostly consists of responding to a set of texts, the process of explaining disciplinary concepts requires critical thinking about the specific uses of those texts. In order to show proficiency in a concept, students must be able to choose the elements of a text based on how they need to convey their understanding and apply it to analyzing objects of study; they may be asked to use a theory to explain certain aspects of an event, fictional text, or artwork—quite common exercises on exams or essay prompts. By understanding the nature of their answer as confined by the parameters of a given assignment—such as amount of space to answer a question or amount of time provided to write—students can transfer the understanding of how they created their zine to how they may compile information in other situations.

ACRL Frame Scholarship as Conversation

Often, it is difficult for students to recognize that their own work is in conversation with other scholars' work. They may feel too much the novice, not seeing that they are doing more than just regurgitating ideas. The frame Scholarship as Conversation aims to get students to "see themselves as contributors to scholarship rather than only consumers of it."[30] Similar to understanding the process of creating information, understanding their role as participants in the scholarly conversation can be difficult to conceive if students are mostly required to respond to required readings and not contribute their own original ideas. However, inherent in zines is the idea that the writer is contributing their voice to a greater dialog. Ramdarshan Bold states in the article "Why Diverse Zines Matter: A Case Study of the People of Color Zines Project," "Zinesters are creating their own narratives, which subvert and challenge mainstream viewpoints and realities: this counters the hegemonic stronghold of cultural production and expression."[31] By creating a zine, workshop participants were able to think of their object of creation as contributing their own voice to a greater conversation about their chosen theme.

While the applicability of this frame may seem counterintuitive since students were not required to cite sources or include a bibliography with their zine, many of the dispositions incorporated within this frame are intuitive in the zine creation process. For example, the steps taken to physically create the zine allows students to see themselves as actively contributing an argument to a larger discussion, rather than being passive listeners or readers. The basic nature of the format of a zine indicates that students can "recognize that scholarly conversations take place in various venues."[32] The zine creation process allows students to think more expansively so they may "value user-generated content and evaluate contributions made by others."[33] And, by their own engagement in the creation process, they may "understand the responsibility that comes with entering the conversation through participatory channels."[34]

Moreover, in the context of this workshop, the students were literally in conversation with the historical zines on display by remixing their phrases or styles, and even with the source materials of magazines and journals they cut up, changing the original meanings of the words and images printed in popular or scholarly texts. For example, by cutting up

images from fashion and pop culture magazines, one student questioned and subverted the portrayal of Black women in popular media.

While the authors did not include a reflection piece with this workshop, a short discussion at the end could provide ways for students to recognize the above ideas, as well as the other frames presented by ACRL, as they pertain to their own writing and critical thinking. This will be discussed in the next section.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on the success of this zine workshop, the authors have recommendations as to how the workshop could be enhanced or be adapted to other situations and purposes. These recommendations would work best if the workshop were converted to an in-class activity or series of activities, which could then be used to build up to a final assignment of creating a zine; they could also be used for a stand-alone workshop, perhaps with faculty members assigning extra credit for attending.

Although students were very engaged with the historical zines brought to the workshop, engagement could be deepened in several ways. With a specific course, zines relating to course content could be selected so that the course itself would serve to give greater context to the materials and vice versa. Students could be asked to immerse themselves more deliberately in the zines, answering a series of questions that ask them to engage with the object through directed observation, such as: Who is the creator or audience? Which materials were used, and what might that indicate? When was the zine created; what is its historical context? What do the text and/or images convey? What is the purpose of the object? and so on. Students could then create their own zines in the style of the historical zines or make zines that convey a topic or theme from the class in lieu of a traditional journal entry or essay.

Students could also be asked to more thoughtfully engage with information literacy concepts through a directed discussion at the end of the workshop or class activity. Instructors could prompt students to consider their own roles as creators of information: On what topic is the student presenting themselves as an author[ity]? How is authority imagined in the context of a zine as opposed to, say, a scholarly article? How does your own zine agree with, disagree with, or add on to concepts presented in the historical zines or in the magazines you cut up for text and images? What are the benefits and limitations of zines as a communication medium? Students could analyze one another's zines, as well.

For libraries without a zine collection, this workshop or class activity could be adapted to take advantage of existing collections such as artists' books or archives. Students could create zines inspired by these collections or create other DIY projects like broadsides. Otherwise, digitally available zines, such as those collected in the POC Zine Project, could be viewed online while students create their own. Overall, this type of zine workshop is highly adaptable to the themes of many different courses, and, can promote information literacy while allowing students to express their ideas through an alternative medium.

Notes

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