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Participatory Research Proposal: Zine Workshops for Academic Libraries

Introduction

Seattle was the city where I came of age in the late 2010s, and I recall a widespread change of small businesses and family-owned spaces to business offices and exorbitantly-priced apartments for a clientele of a higher income bracket. As the city goes through the process of getting a “facelift,” minoritized spaces have been crumbling under the pressure of a development desire for a more affluent urban community. Out of this crucible of disappearing publics and the violence and harassment of minorities, the production and distribution of zines – small, independent, borrowed magazines – have recently emerged as an important reclamation of space.

Zines, in their production value and their subversion and resistance to making new meanings out of mainstream culture, seek to cultivate space for “aesthetic play,” as David Muggleton’s *Inside Subculture* calls the unifying term for all do-it-yourself (DIY) activities marked by “fluid explorations and interpretations” of cultural practices, which visualize and produce against the grain – emphasizing “noise as opposed to sound” (Hebdige, 1991; Muggleton, 2001). But within subcultures, how do zines function as texts of resistance and alternative modes of communication? How are they used to create a space for fluidity of expression and interpretation? How do they contribute towards a broader understanding of “literacy,” and how can academic libraries and educational institutions implement them to develop this “literacy”?

Answering these questions is why I seek a Community Catalyst Initiative (CCI) grant from the Institute for Museum & Library Services to develop a project for the University of Washington Libraries that will help students develop skills in multimodal literacy and an understanding of public history by creating zines. Zine workshops, across contexts, use borrowed materials as “aesthetic play,” in which the creators will seek to employ oral histories as a qualitative method that will fill gaps of public history, which is especially critical in highly developed yet marginalized U.S. cities like the Seattle area. The building and creation of zine-making spaces among academic libraries will be explored as students will critically analyze these missing conversations as they relate to systems of power. Subculture, as we understand and explore it, will be situated in this project as a culture of choice marked by a cultivation and creation of space that provides collaborative approaches to looking at identity formation, stylistic play, and active cultural resistance. This project will focus on the zine as a critical material and

method of “aesthetic play” to build community, creativity, and literacy among students passionate about a variety of cultural issues.

Literature Review

Elements of zines as an alternative form of media that creates space for alternate avenues of communication, as well as their function within subcultures, collaborate under the conditions of identity construction (Muggleton, 2000). The spaces to develop zines have been marked by a distinct commitment to co-opting language and imagery to deface or subvert oppression. While the construction and maintenance of identities is important within subcultures, there is little evidence to support the centrality of alternative texts like zines in present scholarship. *DIY: The Rise of Lo-Fi Culture* by Amy Spencer provides a useful exploration of zines as a broader part of the DIY aesthetic and how they relate to the building of communities, but fails to address them without a degree of depth (Spencer, 2008). Emily Gray and Joanna Politt’s article “Between Activism and Academia” single out zines and other alternative media as a “new project of study” within the field of media and communication studies, drawing on them as a site for community building, encouraging members within “communities of interest and practice” to engage in participation in these formats (Gray/Politt, 2022). Looking for histories of community and creation of subcultural spaces in the Pacific Northwest is largely invisible in both scholarship and historical accounts, yet Gray and Politt’s article and Spencer’s book both provide useful information for how we look at alternative media as a format for “disrupting” cultural hegemony.

One of the first academic analyses of zines, Chris Atton’s “What is a Zine?” addresses them as “agents of community-building” and sociality within music and film fandoms. Examining them as both tools for communication and interpersonal/collective relationship-building, Atton was one of the first scholars in the field of media studies to create space for zines as “a format worthy of interrogation from the academy,” providing critical insight into the investments of self-published work as tools for political and personal engagement (Atton, 2002). Zines are highlighted as distinct “counter-publics” that act as direct action for marginalized identities. Atton explores various individual and collective issues, supplemented by the role of identity politics in zine creation, yet more extensive grounding in identity politics as a field is relevant and necessary for this research.

Identity politics would be a major element of this study, specifically for the subcultures and social movements that produce zines as tools for community-building. Joshua Gamson’s *Freaks Talk Back: Queer Kinship, and Contemporary Nonconformity* discusses the development of a “queer” subculture in 1980s America, and the mass disagreements over that term. Looking primarily at California newspapers Gamson looks at the politically-charged members of the community, mostly younger generations, who take on the “mantle of queer” as a radical and activist identity (Gamson, 2005). Gamson’s analysis of the fragmented identities of the Bay Area provides critical elements on the development of collective identities, but sheds little light on

queer identities as emergent from subcultures, and in fact only views subculture as a supplemental evidence of this development.

Moving towards a much more contemporary definition of “queer,” Marika Cifor’s “Mediating Queer and Trans Pasts” grounds the research of LGBT communities in the importance of looking at self-publishing and alternative media, political activism, and the occupation of public space. The importance of zines and zine-making within queer subcultures as “a textual archive of the complexity of identity” is a central theme of this paper, as is the importance of alternative media in generating political movements (Cifor, 2021). Cifor’s article is unique in the insights she brings surrounding third-wave feminism and its positionality in relationship to the growing queer subcultures during the AIDS epidemic, and discusses the stylistic elements of pastiche borrowed from Muggleton’s *Inside Subculture*. In Cifor’s 2017 transcription of an interview with activist Jessica Rosenberg, part of her doctoral dissertation, the role of various forms of art – including zines, music, visual art, and photography – in these movements is discussed, specifically how it plays in the development of identities and the creation of spaces resistant to dominant mainstream culture (Cifor, 2017).

The stylistic elements of subcultures have been famously examined by Frederic Jameson in his landmark work *Post-Modernism*, which develops the “postmodern” as the fragmentation of identity that comes when “high culture enters the public sphere.” Jameson’s study of art and fashion as they are situated in, and contingent upon, modernity and a reclamation of identities “stripped by capitalism” is an essential text in exploring and examining the development of subcultures and their practices (Jameson, 1991). Alongside Jameson’s ideas, Nancy Fraser’s “Rethinking ‘Public’” is critical to the specific study of queer and feminist subcultures. Fraser advances the idea of “counter-publics” that reside outside of Jameson’s public sphere. She argues for “parallel discursive arenas” where members of “subordinated” social groups can invent and circulate counter-discourses, often politically charged, to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs (Fraser, 1992).

Lastly, to fill some gaps between this highly theoretical work and some more practical approaches to working with students, I found Paulo Freire’s “constructionist” approach to education, found in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, to be a source of inspiration on how to center students when creating learning experiences. Freire discusses constructionist pedagogy as a tool of “re-humanization,” where learners become active agents in their learning contexts by empowering themselves, affirming their identities, and “building up critical strategies to engage with the world around them” (Freire, 1970). The community-centric nature of this project builds from Freire’s theory and previous efforts in zine-based education as the backgrounds of learners will empower them to create zines on issues they are passionate about changing. If approved for a grant, this project will explore subcultures through creative approaches to student development, specifically the creation of affirming public spaces and DIY creative activities. I will bring in

zine-making as an alternative communication, media, and literacy practice for students, grounded equally in postmodern theory and practice, constructionism, and the fluidity of expression.

Project Design and Methodology

This project seeks to perform “Participatory Action Research” as described by the CCI grant’s guidelines for approved approaches to research. Participatory action research (PAR) is an approach to academic inquiry that involves researchers and participants directly working together to understand problems and change them for the better. I plan on working closely with students – my previously-identified community of interest – to recognize curricular needs and gaps and facilitate student-library collaborations. Working closely with the studied community may highlight resources, methods, and considerations that my perspective as a staff member and researcher would not have shown, and lift the voices and experiences of students.

In order to design this zine-based learning project, I will build upon existing assets, including those found at the university and within the broader Seattle area, namely: existing approaches to integrating zines into academic curricula, UW resources for library workshops, especially participatory ones, the Zine Archiving and Publishing Project (ZAPP) located in the Seattle Public Library Central Branch, and insight from students, faculty, and library staff at UW. Ultimately, my aim is to identify and develop ways that the UW Libraries’ staff could support student development and multimodal literacy efforts through impactful learning experiences. My project investigates three core questions:

1. Based on existing precedents in zine-based learning curricula, what are some core competencies needed?
2. What skills and concepts in multimodal literacy and communication do students already practice at UW?
3. What gaps are seen by faculty and staff between these core competencies and the skills students currently learn and practice?

I plan on implementing this curriculum over the course of three years. The first will focus on curriculum research and development. My curriculum design will be informed by existing literature and curricula on this subject, as well as University of Washington resources, which will both provide context for the capacity of the university as an academic community to increase multimodal literacy and commitments to participatory action. Data collection and curriculum co-design, alongside students and faculty, will enable the libraries to support student development in this area.

Year 1: Exploration and Design

In the first year of this proposed project, I will conduct a literature review of zine-based learning efforts by academic libraries and higher education institutions across the U.S. as well as existing resources located at the University of Washington, from departments that have

implemented zines in various ways – namely the College of Arts & Sciences’ Communication, Gender, Women & Sexuality Studies, and American Ethnic Studies majors and minors, UW Libraries’ Storytelling Fellows program (which is only open to graduate students), and the College of the Environment’s Environmental Studies major (who have used zines to address issues and feelings related to climate change). Additionally, ZAPP resources from the Seattle Public Library will be scanned and digitized to show future “example zines” for students to base their work on, and data collected on campus will include openness to collaboration and student mentorship from faculty and staff. This data will next be qualitatively analyzed for key themes and patterns, ultimately producing a list of core competencies needed for students and how zines can fulfill them.

I plan on raising interest for such a curriculum through on-campus advertisements as well as in-class guest talks by myself or another instruction librarian, demonstrating the many forms and applications of creative communication in academia which may excite students about the potential workshops. This is especially important in the classroom, where multimodal literacy and communication are a partial, yet underdeveloped, focus. Next, I will work with the unit to conduct focus group interviews with undergraduate students, grouped by their year (freshman, sophomore, etc.), which will give the curriculum team insight on their existing knowledge, what skills they want to learn, and what sort of issues excite them. The intention is for students to benefit from a collaborative brainstorming atmosphere in which they can collectively identify a wider range of desired skills and concepts that zines can cover. Notes will be qualitatively collected and analyzed to identify important themes and patterns from the conversations. I intend to wrap up each focus group by collecting individual feedback in the form of a brief online survey. A potential risk here is that students may identify desired skills or interests outside of the Libraries’ realistic scopes or capacities, which the list of existing resources will hopefully address.

Faculty participation is also crucial to the project’s success. Surveys will be sent out to faculty in the aforementioned departments, as well as some adjacent ones, across all three UW campuses. These surveys, performed online, will ask them to identify some concepts and skills related to zine production and multimodal communication that they teach, and skills and concepts needed to make them effective. Responses will be automatically recorded into a secure database and qualitatively analyzed, coded for themes, and lumped as appropriate for standardization. Codes will then be quantitatively assessed for frequencies and rankings.

Collectively, this data from students and faculty will allow the Libraries to define students’ existing levels of multimodal literacy and determine learning goals among “gaps” in the core competencies developed by the unit. These learning goals will inform the design of these public zine workshops, hosted by the Libraries.

Year 2: Implementation and Evaluation

The second year of this project will focus on curriculum implementation and analysis. As the Libraries test the workshops over the course of a school year, I will gather multiple forms of feedback from participants, which will be quantitatively measured for engagement frequency and satisfaction. These evaluations will occur quarterly to measure progress from our initial state of multimodal literacy. This data analysis will assess the workshop curriculum's effectiveness in using alternative forms of communication and publishing to fight against problematic issues and increase students' creative thinking and confidence. A potential hindrance to robust evaluation may be a lack of consistent participation to measure progress over time, which will be addressed by aiming for stronger participation from first- and second-year students, who are guaranteed to spend at least two years on campus.

Year 3 and Beyond: Strengthening and Disseminating

In the final year of this grant, the UW Libraries will strengthen and grow these zine-based workshops, specifically by implementing revisions from previous years' findings. Continuous evaluation during and at the end of the third year will inform our final draft of a Zine-Based Learning curriculum toolkit, which will be shared with interested curriculum developers and instructional designers, as well as other academic and public libraries, high schools, and nonprofit organizations. Ultimately, the project aims to cultivate not only students' creative skills, but their ability to take advocacy for their learning and use it to transform complex social issues. Through conscientious instructional design and reflexive evaluation, the Libraries aim to effectively support the multimodal literacy and communication skills of learners of various levels and learning styles.

Zines have the power to be a creative tool for students who wish to incorporate their perspectives and techniques into their work. If approved for funding, my library unit intends to document and share our process in the form of a "Zine-Based Learning Toolkit" that will acknowledge the entire development of these workshops and the journey it took for the finished product. This could be a transformative tool to integrate methods from previously marginalized subcultures into the university, and could open up partnerships with a variety of other instructional settings, such as public schools and libraries or educational nonprofits in the Seattle area. Out of this participatory action approach, I hope to improve upon the integration of alternative cultural production and modes of communication within academic spaces, and work with students to fill an existing gap that will help create a path towards more accessible library spaces for the sharing, communication, and appropriation of information, and how it can be used for social justice and social change.

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