



“I should probably know more...”: Reasons for and roadblocks to the use of historic collections

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Collections of dress and textiles can make subjects such as history come to life. However previous studies and anecdotal evidence have shown that many collections are underutilized within university settings (Marcketti & Fitzpatrick 2013). The purpose of this paper was to examine what factors influence the use of collections in the university classroom, and to ask whether there are barriers in place that prevent more frequent use of these resources.

Following institutional review board exemption, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with curators and collection managers at twelve institutions. These respondents ($n=15$) were then asked to identify and recommend faculty members who did or did not use the collection. From this, a total of 15 faculty members were interviewed: nine who utilized the collection, and six who did not. Interview recordings were transcribed with pseudonyms assigned. The data were analyzed using the Miles and Huberman process (1994).

For those that used the collection, there were 2 primary themes discovered: 1) knowledge of the collection processes gained through prior experiences and 2) unequivocal understanding of the benefits of using the collection in teaching dress related classes. Related to theme 1, Jeanine stated, “Basically as soon as I was hired, I knew about it... I also graduated from a university in which we had a collection, which was also pretty heavily used.” Regarding the importance for student learning, Laura stated, “We’re seeing pieces that have unusual construction and it’s just

opening up their eyes.....We're like the paparazzi. They can look at books and publications, but seeing in real life the garments, it helps a lot with supplementing the design process.”

For those faculty that did not make use of the collection, three primary themes developed: 1) lack of time and lack of accessibility to utilize the collection, 2) the perceived complicated procedures and processes of using the collection, and 3) lack of knowledge/disappointment in the collection. Related to theme 2, Christina noted, there was a “whole kind of song and dance” associated with object selection and use, which made it difficult for her to engage. A number of faculty expressed a lack of understanding about their respective collection’s holdings, or indicated dissatisfaction with collection offerings. Paulina found that the collection’s holdings were not always relevant to her teaching: “The requirement, I gave them... was inspired by Alexander McQueen, but this project [does] not match our museum [holdings].”

Collection managers and curators cannot work to resolve roadblocks to use if they remain unspoken by their colleagues. Drawing from the interview transcripts, the researchers will illuminate possible barriers that prevent faculty from utilizing collections. We will also provide ways to encourage use of these valuable resources. These suggestions will be guided by organizational learning theory which states changes to individuals’ actions include both declarative knowledge or facts and procedural knowledge or skills and routines (Argote, 2013).

Bibliography

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