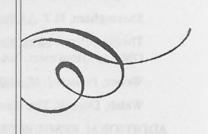# "IMAG-ING OUR FOREMOTHERS":
ART AS A MEANS OF PROMOTING
INFORMATION LITERACY

by Kristi Palmer

INTRODUCTION

In February 2005, a group of twenty IUPUI history students gathered in the lounge of University Library to paint a semester's worth of research. The 4' x 6' mural that graces the walls of the 2nd floor corridor of the IUPUI Business/SPEA building is the final product of a multi-faceted research project rooted in librarian-taught information literacy skills. During a year long workshop for librarians interested in becoming more dynamically involved with learners' acquisition, application, and retention of information literacy skills, an art related experience entitled Imag-ing Our Foremothers: Art as a Means of Connecting with Women's History was conceived. The project had four major goals and two distinct components.

The Goals:

1. To introduce students to art as a viable and interesting research resource,

2. To increase student awareness of art resources accessible through the library,

3. To embed the concept that the skills learned and the library resources consulted during this project are easily applied to any other academic, professional, or personal future research, and finally,

4. To demonstrate to educators and other librarians that librarians, as information literacy experts, can and should be involved in curriculum development.

The Components:

1. A lesson plan for an art related research experience to be completed by university history students, and

2. A replication kit with templates and instructions for other educators/librarians to conduct a similar project at their institution.

As the scope of this *Indiana Libraries* issue is art in libraries, the following discussion will focus on the art related goals (goals 1 and 2) and the classroom art project component (component 1). Any educator but specifically any librarian interested in promoting art as an information resource or using art as an innovative means to teach more general information literacy skills will find this article of interest.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND PROJECT IMPETUS

The Leading Edge Librarians Academy, a year long workshop led by education consultants Excelleration Inc. and sponsored by the Indianapolis Foundation, was the starting point for *Imag-ing Our Foremothers*. During the course of the workshop attendees became familiar with an educational model referred to as the Knowledge Management (KM) Wave[SM]. The KM Wave[SM], similar to the Big Six, is made unique by its final two stages which require the completion of an Applied Knowledge Product. This is a tangible, lasting, reusable (in the sense that others are able to learn from the object) product that is created through the application of knowledge which is directly gained through the use of information literacy skills. The 4' x 6' mural became this project's Applied Knowledge Product.

The KM WaveSM operates under the theory that information literacy skills do not become part of a person's skill set until those skills are utilized to create a real world product. For example, consider the difference in the application of knowledge acquired by an intern who completes a window display on the women's suffrage movement at the Museum of Women's History versus the type of knowledge gained when a student writes a ten-page term paper on the same movement. The intern must conduct research similar to that needed for a term paper, but additionally must apply this information. They must handle original documents and artifacts to create a display that will educate and inspire museum visitors. It is that additional step, the extra analysis and personal interaction with the information sources that leads to a more heightened sense of understanding.

Certainly a mural is only one example of any number of final products that could have helped a class of university students acquire information literacy skills. I chose an art related project for several reasons. First, I remembered when my own undergraduate history

courses required analysis of art in an historical context and how much my interaction with the visual history made me feel more connected to, and more interested in, the history as a whole. Second, IUPUI is fortunate to have subscriptions to image databases such as ARTstor and AccuNet/AP Multimedia Archive, as well as IUPUI University Library and Herron Art Library produced digital image collections, see http://www.ulib.iupui.edu/digitalcollections/home.html, but these sources are often under utilized. There is research to support the notion that the critical thinking skills used in analyzing art can be employed in other learning arenas. In *Æsthetic Thought, Critical Thinking and Transfer*, Abigail C. Housen wrote, "The results of our five-year study supported our hypothesis that our curriculum (an art-viewing program originally designed to develop the range of thoughts and feeling that occur when looking at art). . . causes the growth of critical thinking and enables its transfer to other contexts and content" (p. 99-100).

Finally, as the library liaison to IUPUI's Department of History, I am often approached by students and faculty interested in accessing primary resources, or "sources of direct evidence that describe or document an historical event from the perspective of someone who was there" (UCLA Institute on Primary Resources, 2005, webpage). While the inclusion of primary resources is often required in college level history papers, many times students are unaware of the types of sources that can be considered primary (art for example) and unacquainted with the library tools that will help them gain access to these various primary sources. Images and art are a rich source of primary documentation and studies indicate that the inclusion of primary resource material in the curriculum not only engages students on a deeper level but also encourages the development of critical thinking skills. One such study by Bill Tally and Lauren B. Goldenberg, which assessed student behavior and reaction to research involving digitized primary resources, states: "Students' comments about their resource-rich history classrooms echo what we have long known about 'hands-on' learning in other parts of the curriculum, notably science and mathematics: When students have structured opportunities to construct meaning from primary materials, and critically examine those meanings, they feel more invested in the results" (p. 16).

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

In the summer of 2004, I approached Robin Henry, an Indiana University history doctoral teaching fellow, about allowing her class to participate in *Imag-ing Our Foremothers*. Henry was thrilled to incorporate an innovative project into her *Women and Gender in the U. S.* history course and we sat down to adjust the project framework to fit her particular course. The

students' portion of the project consisted of four graded assignments, the Mural Review assignment, the Mural Review In-Class Presentations, the painting of the mural, and the final term paper. Each assignment built upon the previous and reinforced the connection between understanding how to research a topic and the knowledge gained from conducting the research. Each assignment had its own grading rubric to ensure that students knew the evaluation criteria.

FIRST DAY OF CLASS

On the first day of class the students were introduced to the project as a whole. They were presented with clearly defined objectives and expectations as well as the specifics of each of the four related assignments. There were many skeptics in the group, with comments such as, "This is not an art class... How can we be evaluated on an art project?..." The students were assured that evaluation was by no means contingent on their abilities as painters, rather it would be the manner in which they were able to describe what their art work meant to them and how it related to their research. From one student, "I have to admit when I heard we were going to have to draw and paint for the mural project I was a little nervous. However, when we started working with the canvas and putting our ideas to life it was really exciting."

My participation, as the librarian, in the first day of class was key in establishing myself and the library as an essential component to success in this course and having the project included on the syllabus reinforced that the project itself would receive equal weight in the students' eyes. Despite initial concerns about artistic abilities, most students seemed intrigued by the uniqueness of the learning opportunity.

LIBRARY DAY

A few weeks into the semester, the class met at University Library. I discussed the mural project in greater depth, distributed a bibliography of art and image resources, and demonstrated many of the resources/databases on the bibliography. Each student used a laptop for the duration of the library class and enjoyed the opportunity for their first hands-on experience with the tools. Although I demonstrated only art and image databases, I continually reinforced the concept that the manner in which the art databases were being searched, the skills and thought processes they were using to find appropriate images, were similar if not identical to those used to search for books, articles, DVDs and CDs. Therefore, not only did the students learn how to think about keywords and searching strategies for locating images, they also acquired skills that would help them locate the scholarly articles and books that were required for the final paper.

In addition to the database demonstration, I presented copyright and fair use standards as they relate to images and educational usage, how to properly cite images, and how to evaluate images when searching an unrestricted site such as Google. Many students had assumed Google would be the easiest place to find their images until they became more familiar with the more stringent copyright policies on digital art as well as the lack of authoritative quality that may accompany images found on the open web. The in-library demonstration and hands-on activity prepared students for their first assignment, the Mural Review.

MURAL REVIEW ASSIGNMENT

Each student was asked to select three significant events or people (or any combination of the two) in U.S. women's history that interested her. For each of these people or events the students were asked to:

- Write a one-page essay including important details about the topic and why the topic was significant in the context of U. S. women's history

- Cite a written scholarly resource that had been consulted

- Locate an image or piece of art that represented the person or event reviewed

- Cite the image or art selected

- Include a copy of the image's usage rights information

- Write a one-paragraph summary of her search strategy

- Write a one to three-paragraph summary of why she chose the image she did

For one of these three people or events, students were asked to:

- Draw a sketch that portrayed an aspect of or symbolized the person or event

PRESENTATION DAY

About mid-semester the students' mural reviews were complete and each student presented the person or event she had researched. Tosca Webb, a local mural artist and art teacher chosen to assist with the mural painting, and I attended presentation day. This again reinforced the validity of the library and the art in this research project. It was quickly apparent as the students described their drawings that searching for art and creating their own art had sparked a type or level of analysis not often experienced in their previous university courses. Students described the symbolism they found in the researched art and how that symbolism influenced their own sketches. As each student

spoke, Webb provided feedback on the artistic symbolism and technical painting aspects that each student should consider when painting her piece on the mural and I offered feedback to those who struggled with their research strategies.

Participating in the discussion allowed Webb to gain a greater sense of the mural as a whole as she had agreed to prepare the canvas and create the background of the mural before the students began working with it. Indeed a great deal of behind the scenes work was being accomplished by me and Webb to ensure that the logistics for the students' painting of the mural were in order.

LOGISTICS OF PAINTING A MURAL

Art supplies are not inexpensive. The completion of this project was dependent upon the nearly $3,000 grant from the Indianapolis Foundation. The grant provided a stipend for Webb and the ability to purchase a large canvas, paint, and brushes. Yet, this project can be conducted on a smaller scale with little to no external funding. The replication kit cited at the end of this article for those interested in conducting a project of this nature, details how *Imag-ing Our Foremothers* can be altered to fit a variety of teaching and budget situations.

Funding the supplies was not the only barrier to project completion. Finding the types of supplies needed, especially the oversized canvas was no easy task. The decision was made to paint the mural on a canvas rather than directly on a wall as it would be more portable and protected from destruction on a campus that is continually upgrading its physical appearance. Fortunately, Webb was also skilled in assembling canvas frames. All the needed supplies were acquired in just enough time to allow Webb to assemble the canvas and complete the background, a geometric grid of blank diamonds into which each of the students would paint her own art work, and a centerpiece depicting three women marching for suffrage.

I also ran into various space issues. I needed to find a secure area on campus where the canvas could be assembled and painted, materials could be left unattended overnight for the course of six to seven weeks as well as large enough to accommodate our canvas and eighteen budding artists. A portion of the student lounge in the lower level of University Library was sectioned off for the painting of the mural. While Webb constructed and prepared the mural background, I tackled the red tape involved in installing an art work on a public university campus.

IUPUI has a Public Art Committee through which all public art permanently installed on IUPUI's campus must filter. A proposal describing the overall intent of

the project but specifically detailing the mural piece was submitted and approved. Yet, approval did not necessarily mean that an actual home for the mural had been found. The next step was to locate and contact the appropriate person or group to gain permission to hang the painting in the pre-selected space. I wanted a space that was uncluttered of other visual objects, very public, and connected to or in the library. The perfect location, the 2nd floor corridor of the IUPUI Business/SPEA building, directly outside the walkway that connects this building to University Library was secured. I detail these various bumps in the road as a means to encourage anyone considering a project of this nature to be prepared for unforeseeable circumstances, be they circumstances particular to an institution or to painting a mural.

PAINTING THE MURAL

The students were given three in-class days to transfer and paint their original sketch onto the canvas. The first day all eighteen students were in attendance to hear the basic painting guidelines provided by Webb. After attempting to have all eighteen students work on the mural at once it was decided that the students should stagger their time with the mural, allowing each artist more working space. With the assistance of Webb the students used pencil rubbings to literally transfer their graphite sketches onto the canvas. Colors were selected with each student keeping in mind she wanted her piece to standout and not blend into the work of those around her. Finally, with painting technique assistance from Webb, the students began to paint. Many commented on how surprised they were by their drawing and painting abilities. They enjoyed the tactile experience of mixing the paints and choosing colors that symbolized the feelings they wanted to represent. One student, who had never picked up an art paint brush in her life, was so enthused with her new found talent that she was considering pursuing additional painting activities.

Within several weeks the mural was complete. Though no one would suggest the mural is a perfect rendering of a technically sophisticated muralist, the goal of the mural was beautifully accomplished. Not only did the students who painted the mural gain insight into women's U. S. history, methods of research, analytical skills, and how to create art, but the people that pass by and pause in front of the mural have the opportunity to consider, "Who are the people in this mural?, Who created this mural?, and How did they create it?" Passersby may recognize symbols they have seen before or they may find themselves wanting to find out more (i.e. research). This is the ultimate premise of the educational model (the KM Wave[SM]) upon which *Imag-ing Our Foremothers* was founded, to develop an active learning experience that inspires learners to apply information literacy skills to create a real world product that encourages others to pursue knowledge and use their own information literacy skills. From another student, "The mural project brought the class together to complete a project that was totally unique to my education. Not only did I learn more about the subjects chosen by my classmates, I was also able to share a subject that has always fascinated me."

CONCLUSION

The mural is not only proof of the students' successful research, it is also representative of how and why librarians should be an intrinsic piece of the education process. The mural project would not have held as much pertinent, applicable experience for the students had it not been firmly rooted in teaching information literacy skills. From one student, "As for the research paper and the mural, that was my favorite part of the class. I loved researching, designing, and creating my own little diamond on our mural as much as I enjoyed researching and learning more about my [topic]."

It is the library that purchases databases such as ARTstor and AccuNet/AP Multimedia Archive which offer students access to pre-selected and evaluated images as well as the means to easily establish the images' educational usage rights. It is the librarians who articulate and demonstrate that the search strategies employed in the art databases can be simply applied to research tools that house more traditional sources such as articles and books. *Imag-ing Our Foremothers* pushed the envelope for librarian involvement in curriculum development and painted a bright picture of how art can be a viable, effective, and inspiring tool in the non-art classroom. From another student, "I felt that this project not only gave me, but my fellow classmates the chance to explore different aspects of our researched women's success throughout our mural. I hope that other people, other women will look at this mural and see the beauty in each and every person depicted. It is something that we created from our hearts and we are lucky enough to have the chance to share these women and their lives with other people."

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

A replication kit for this project, including step-by-step daily teaching guides, materials to be distributed in class, and evaluative rubrics can be found in IUPUI's Digital Archive (IDeA), at: https://idea.iupui.edu/handle/1805/267.

REFERENCES

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UCLA Institute on Primary Resources: What are Primary Resources? Webpage. 26 February 2006 < http://ipr.ues.gseis.ucla.edu/info/definition.html>.

The completed mural.