

Jane A. Carlin and Cindy B. Damschroder

# Beautiful and useful: The book as a learning object

## Using an honors seminar as a forum to explore information literacy and critical thinking

**W**illiam Morris, the influential British designer, used the phrase “beautiful and useful” to exemplify a view of society he extolled as the leader of the Arts and Crafts movement in England during the latter part of the 19th century.<sup>1</sup> This article examines the collaborative partnership of a librarian and an art historian in the development of an honors seminar at the University of Cincinnati (UC) entitled: “William Morris and His World.” Designed as an active learning experience, the course incorporated principles of information literacy and critical thinking as learning goals. The class examined the profound influence of William Morris, the Kelmscott Press, how the Arts and Crafts movement was embraced in America and how those ideas have been translated to today’s digital world. Students examined numerous examples of fine press books and publications from the Arts and Crafts movement including essays by Morris, books of the Kelmscott Press, as well as major periodicals (such as *The Philistine* and *The Craftsman*), and considered how these objects reflected the artistic and social issues of the time and questioned if the concepts and principles held by Morris and his followers still apply in the 21st century. Specific course objectives reinforced many of the core principles of information literacy, such as integration of knowledge, critical thinking, and the context of information:

- to understand the political, economic, artistic, and cultural forces that gave rise to the Arts and Crafts movement;

- to recognize, discuss, and write about Arts and Crafts graphic and visual arts as well as

- architecture in concrete terms using appropriate vocabulary;

- to become acquainted with the values and methods of archival and historical research through examination of primary documents and publications from the University Libraries as well as the Cincinnati Art Museum and the Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County; and

- to become acquainted with the basic elements of book design and construction and to develop an appreciation of the interrelationship between text and image.

### Context: The UC Honors Program

With an emphasis on knowledge integration and experiential learning, the University Honors Program is among UC’s best practices of Integrated Core Learning (ICL). The program is focused on four themes:

- community engagement
- global studies
- leadership
- research and creative arts

ICL was developed as the thoughtful integration of all aspects of the undergraduate experience, including the General Education core, major course work, experiential learning, co-curricular activities, and faculty-guided reflection.

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Honors seminars provide students the opportunity to develop proficiency in General Education outcomes, which include effective communication, social responsibility, knowledge integration, and critical thinking. These core learning outcomes run parallel with the core principles of information literacy and therefore provide a strong foundation for faculty/librarian course development.

### **The librarian as teacher—Using subject expertise in the classroom**

Generating excitement and enthusiasm about the research process that results in authentic learning that can be retained and transferred to new experiences is a primary goal of teaching librarians.

The close association between the book as a cultural artifact and as a work of art provided the opportunity to integrate the study of book publishing, history, and design within the larger context of art and architecture, and thus set the stage for a successful partnership between art historian and librarian. An honors art history survey class was already established at the university and taught by art and architectural historian, Cindy Damschroder. This provided the opportunity for collaboration which would emphasize strengths in both our disciplines while meeting the objectives of the honors program. We were able to integrate not only the fundamental ICL principles but do so within the rubric of the honors themes, resulting in a successful partnership.

This approach to course development positioned the library as an active learning center and introduced students to new ways of thinking about the history of published materials, an increased awareness of the changing information world, and, most importantly, raised the visibility of both the library as a center for teaching and learning and the librarian as a subject expert. This course model of using collections as a cornerstone or inspiration for academic study is reflected in a series of courses developed at UC by librarians and faculty:

**The Printed Page: From Victorian to Virtual.** This class explored the interactions between text and image, as well as examined

the impact of the 19th-century industrial revolution and the Aesthetic Movement on design, printing, and communication. Cotaught by Jane Carlin and Barbara Wenner (associate professor of English and comparative literature).

**Music, Art, and Thought in Medici Florence.** Students study the political, economic, artistic, and cultural forces that gave rise to Florence as a unique center of Renaissance humanism. Cotaught by Jane Carlin and Stephanie Schlager (associate professor of musicology).

**The Anthropology of Books and Reading.** This class was designed to expose students to the use of the printed word in a cross-cultural sense that reflects not only the physical manifestations of books throughout the centuries but also the politics, religion, economics, and social values. Taught by Kevin Grace (department head, Archives and Rare Books Library).

**Heritage of the Book.** This class explores the book as a physical object throughout time. Taught by Kevin Grace.

**The Graphic Novel.** This class examines the history and cultural relevance of graphic novels cross-globally. Taught by Kevin Grace.

In each of these courses, the book (or associated documents) are central to the learning experience and as Grace states, "The books expand the undergraduate research experience and to explore new and diverse paths in their education."<sup>2</sup>

### **Information literacy and critical thinking**

Current higher education pedagogy reinforces that active learning increases student engagement and learning. This concept is a hallmark of UC S ICL initiative and we purposefully incorporated this pedagogy in the course. We focused on three information literacy themes:

*The information literate student evaluates information and its sources critically and incorporates selected information into his or her knowledge base and value system.*

The class was held in the Design, Architecture, Art, and Planning Library (DAAP), which provided the opportunity to have primary documents, original source materials, and books/journals accessible during each class period for review, comparison, and discussion.

Students examined rare books and documents and discussed topics such as typography, binding, paper, design, book construction, and content during visits to the UC Archives and Rare Books Library. They were able to then compare and contrast the design and construction of books from the period of Morris with modern day publications and consider the impact of e-books, graphic novels, and changing forms of communication.

Course reading assignments were varied yet comprehensive, ranging from Morris News from Nowhere and The Ideal Book to interviews with Morris on the role of women in the labor force. Readings were selected to reflect the entire

World of William Morris, including historical trends, belief systems, and the structure of society, labor laws, and the role of women.

*The information literate student recognizes the cultural, physical, or other context within which the information was created and understands the impact of context on interpreting the information.*

Students were assigned pertinent terms and concepts as they related to William Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement. Not only were students responsible for leading class discussions on the topic, but also used BlackBoard to create an online glossary and at the end of the quarter a printed copy of the Arts and Crafts Glossary was produced for each student. A copy was also deposited in DAAP for use by future students and served as a permanent record of the students work.

The importance and creativity of the contemporary book was explored during our own bookmaking workshop. Local artist, Diane Stemper, led students through a workshop that focused on various elements of book design,

tools, and the creative process of integrating text, image, and design construction into a cohesive object. This resulted in students gaining greater appreciation of printed books and also led to many lively discussions on the future of books and reading in an electronic age.

Class discussions examined reading assignments, terms and concepts, and images in a comprehensive fashion as a way to assimilate knowledge from various sources. We emphasized local connections throughout our class by providing examples of Arts and Crafts art and architecture as well as arranged two visits to the Cincinnati Art Museum, where students examined period art first-hand. We also used the online digital image repository, ARTstor, to create

class folders of images from the period as well as contemporary images for students to compare and contrast.

*The information literate student compares new knowledge with prior knowledge to determine the value added, contradictions, or other unique characteristics of the information.*

The students were assigned a reflective writing assignment that engaged their growing understanding of the Arts and Crafts movement. They were asked if the phrase beautiful and useful still holds true in our present-day society. Other questions posed were, What evidence can you find in our present world that embodies Morris belief that objects can be both well made and artistic yet still be beautiful? Do you think we respect and value the work of an artist or craftsman? Do the values reflected in Morris belief of a Utopian World still hold true today? Students were able to draw on what they had learned in the class and to integrate new knowledge, make comparisons, form their own opinions, and to transfer ideas and



Cindy Damschroder along with students Stephanie Miller and David DeWitt explore book design and art. Photo credit: Lisa Ventre/University of Cincinnati.

concepts from the World of William Morris to the present day.

We read a novel of contemporary popular fiction entitled the *Wayward Muse* by Elizabeth Hickey. This novel was set during the Pre-Raphaelite period and Jane Morris, the wife of William Morris, was the central character. This was yet another way the honors student could connect factual knowledge gained and weave that together with a historical contextualized view.

The final research component of the quarter was an independent project. Each student selected a topic—some based on the knowledge gained from their terms and concepts assignments, others from field trips, while others knowledge came about from primary sources or class discussions. Not only did the students have to make a class presentation, but the students were required to submit an essay that focused on the research process and their criteria for selecting and interpreting information.

The social culmination of the class came with a guest lecture on the etiquette of tea and the social structure of Victorian society and with our own afternoon tea and birthday celebration in honor of William Morris in a local tea shop.

### **Assessment**

Students overwhelmingly responded that the course was challenging and engaging, and that it helped them integrate material across disciplines. They greatly appreciated the teaching methods, interactive aspects, and variety of learning opportunities/experiences. Generally, students indicated that the class was more satisfying than most classes they have taken, that they made connections, and that the hands-on (experiential) components increased their learning. According to Debbie Brawn (academic director of the UC Honors program):

The class is a model for honors education. It fits perfectly within the University Honors theme of research and creative arts. It also incorporates aspects of global studies. It integrates material across disciplines, allowing students to broaden their intellectual horizons beyond the

disciplines in which they are majoring. The experiential learning components are ideal. Many faculty find it challenging to identify ways to incorporate this type of learning into courses. This model provides creative and innovative ways to do that, utilizing different methods—art museum visits, the book making workshop, and the afternoon tea. Allowing the students to experience what they are studying in such tangible and real ways greatly enhances their learning. It also develops an ethic for lifelong learning. This will be the class that they remember forever from their college experience.<sup>3</sup>

Data from student evaluations indicate that this course provided students the opportunity to develop proficiency in the university's general education outcomes (effective communication, social responsibility, knowledge integration, and critical thinking).

57 percent of the students reported that it helped them become more effective communicators.

79 percent reported that it helped them apply knowledge to social issues.

86 percent reported that it helped them integrate knowledge across disciplines.

57 percent reported that it helped to develop their critical thinking skills.

Quotes from students about the William Morris class:

The freedom to relate course content to my major and interests when completing projects was the best part of the class.

It was refreshing and full of learning experiences.

Experiential components were Amazing! Great connections were made to the bigger world.

Experiential learning provides a tangible environment to relate what we've learned to what we could experience.

It made it more real, instead of just abstract ideas.

Taking the learning off campus was extremely fun and educational.

*(continues on page 183)*

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**Goal Area: Leadership**—ACRL members achieve recognition as leaders and advocates for academic and research libraries. ACRL recruits and develops the next generation of academic and research library leaders.

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**Confirmed the ACRL Board of Directors'** e-mail vote of December 30, 2008 January 7, 2009, that approved the creation of the

Standards for Libraries in Higher Education Review Task Force.

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### **Strategic Area: The Association**

**Goal Area: Membership**—ACRL's membership growth builds on retaining core membership while recruiting from new and diverse communities.

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**The Board approved expanding the division-level committee appointments to in-**

clude a one-year term of vice-chair in addition to the one-year term of chair.

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**Goal Area: Organizational Vitality and Effectiveness**—ACRL will have the fiscal resources, staff expertise, and organizational structure to advance the association's strategic plan by deploying data-driven decision making to drive entrepreneurial activities.

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**Approved the minutes of the ACRL Board of Directors meeting held at the 2008 ALA Annual Conference** ([www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/acrl/about/board/index.cfm](http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/acrl/about/board/index.cfm)).

es November 20, 2008, December 16, 2008, December 19, 2008, and January 5, 2009.

**Approved the minutes of the ACRL Board of Directors meeting held by teleconferenc-**

**Dissolved the Information Literacy Advisory Committee and the Institute for Information Literacy Executive Committee.** *Ed. note: The work of these groups will be carried out by the new Information Literacy Coordinating Committee.* ¶¶

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*("Beautiful and useful . . .," continued from page 171)*

### **Conclusion**

The creation of a course that links library collections and artifacts as a central theme to generate critical thinking and reinforce principles of information literacy resulted in a successful partnership that combined the unique subject expertise of both librarian and art historian.

Not only did this course provide students with a new way of looking at books as cultural objects, but also raised the profile of the library as an active center for teaching and learning.

It provided the opportunity to advocate the library and collections not as passive repositories of information, but as active centers

of learning; bringing our collections alive and promoting new ways of seeing.

### **Notes**

1. This phrase was first used by Morris in the lecture "The Beauty of Life," before the Birmingham Society of Arts and School February 19, 1880, and was later published in *Hopes and Fears for Art: Five Lectures Delivered in Birmingham, London, and Nottingham, 1878-1881* (London: Ellis & White, 1882).

2. Kevin Grace, personal correspondence with Jane Carlin, June 7, 2008.

3. Debbie Brawn, personal correspondence with Jane Carlin, June 12, 2008. ¶¶