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Circles of Context: Broadening the information landscapes of visual learners

Abstract

The role of Subject Librarian comes in many different “flavours”, often dependent on the subject areas that are being supported. Since I started work as Academic Librarian for Art, Design and Architecture, my Subject Librarian colleagues and I have struggled to persuade the Art, Design and Architecture students to engage with the resources to which we subscribe. Their lack of use appears prevalent in the Textile/Fashion/Costume students to the point where we have had seriously to consider cancelling a number of resources, even though the Academic staff felt that they are essential for the students. Increasingly, the Academic staff report that the majority of sources that Fashion/Costume students cite in their reference lists are websites rather than scholarly materials and this is clearly a concern for them as they strive to encourage students to develop and enhance their academic and critical faculties as well as their design and creative skills.

This experimental teaching session uses an idea first created by Kaye Towlson entitled “Circles of Context”. It was developed for Art/Design students and attempts to engage them through physical as opposed to textual objects, on the basis that many are visual/kinaesthetic as opposed to textual learners. My pilot group was drawn from Fashion/Textile students and was developed in close collaboration with the module leader, Karen Shah.

Its core premise is to consider physical objects and ask the students to think about a number of questions around it (Who, what, where, when, why and how). In doing so, they relate the object to its social, political, historical and cultural context in a way that makes it more meaningful to them. This provides them with new avenues to explore when searching for information and enables them to link to a wide variety of resources that they may not have otherwise considered. My session also explored mind-mapping as another way of brainstorming and organising ideas to stimulate discussion amongst the participants as well as using coloured cards to evaluate different types of resources and gauge their usefulness within particular contexts (for example, books, newspapers, academic journals and web sites)

Whilst the sample of students involved was small in number, the evaluations they produced showed that this way of working appeared to engage them more effectively than a more traditional “chalk and talk” approach. The intention for the future is to work with academic staff to widen the project out to larger groups in other subject areas in an attempt to replicate similar results and thus enhance both the student experience and increase their knowledge of information sources in their own areas.

Introduction and rationale

Firstly, I do not claim that what you are about to read is my idea. Its originator is Kaye Towlson, Creative Industries Team manager, who presented it at “Making the textual visual” event held at De Montfort University, Leicester on 4 July 2013. From the outset, I found the whole thing intriguing in both concept and execution and decided that it would be an ideal way of trying something different with students from the School of Art, Design and Architecture. It was so simple that it seemed an obvious thing to do, and yet as I delved further into it, I realised that it was actually the embodiment of something that was based on learning styles, object-based learning, and the theory of contextualized objects. From my perspective, it also involved re-working the idea for my own purposes and planning closely with the member of academic staff teaching on that module. The background to why I wished to develop this idea is as follows.

Since starting work as Academic Librarian for Art, Design and Architecture I have struggled to persuade these students to engage with the wide variety of subscription information resources that we have. This lack of use has been particularly noticeable in the Textile/Fashion/Costume students to the point where we have had to consider cancelling a number of resources through lack of use. Academic staff have reported that the majority of sources that such students cite in their reference lists are websites rather than academic or scholarly materials. This is clearly a concern for those of us who wish to encourage students to develop and enhance their academic and critical faculties as well as their design and creative skills.

In the past, my team has been asked in to provide information skills sessions for the new first years, updates for some second-years and pre-dissertation sessions for third years. The format of these has generally been in the traditional form of a PowerPoint followed by demonstrations of different databases using subject-specific keywords. Where time and resources have allowed, we have also provided “hands-on” time so that students have actually had the opportunity to do some searching whilst we were there, so that they could ask questions if they needed to do so.

For my part, I desired to improve the way I taught them and to persuade them to engage with text as well as images and web sites, My starting point for the project came in considering information skills teaching whereby we need to ensure that what we teach is relevant to students’ subject areas but also to their preferred learning style. In respect of this particular group of students, Wilson & McCarthy (2010) suggest that:

Teaching young artists and designers to cope with tools that don’t inspire them is frustrating. Approaching instruction and reference with their unique learning styles in mind is key to giving them a positive experience with library resources. How do visual and kinaesthetic learners access, organize, manipulate and feel about information. How can we use that information to improve the information-seeking behaviours and research processes of visual and kinaesthetic learners

(Wilson & McCarthy, 2010)

Literature review and theoretical framework

Whilst I had the outline of what had been done by Kay Towlson, I wanted to see how this topic was covered in the literature so that I could have a clearer idea of the ways that Art/Design students learn, as well as considering the theoretical underpinning for what I was about to do. With this in mind, I carried out a selective literature search in June 2014 which covered the period 2000-2014 using the following databases. SUMMON, Scopus, British Education Index, ScienceDirect and Google Scholar. My search strategy included the terms listed below:

Object-based learn*, Kinaesthetic learn*, Visual learn*, Learning style*, Information skills, information seeking behaviour These keywords were combined with student*, art student*, costume student*, fashion student*, designers, textile student*.

As a result of my search, I became aware that there was not a large volume of material and I divided it into two main categories. Firstly, this dealt with literature about learning styles/information-seeking behaviour of artists and design students. Secondly, literature that discussed object-based learning. Often the latter was more focussed on within the museum sector. Nevertheless, both were directly relevant to my project and I will mention some of the relevant articles below.

Prior to the commencement of my project, I needed to know more about learning styles and whether particular learning styles had been identified in the student population with which I was dealing. In category one, I located a useful article which compared the learning styles of Textiles students at the University of Manchester with those from Manchester Metropolitan University. The comparison used the Fleming VARK Test (1996) "How do I learn best? which categorised respondents into Visual, Aural, Read/write or Kinaesthetic learners. In summary, the tests with both sets of students showed

Significant trends in these designers being active and hand-on, yet requiring time for contemplation and reflection. These traits should be fully exploited through practical projects, demonstrations, problem-based learning and tutorials requiring significant student participation, mirroring Kolb's theory of experiential learning (Kolb, 1984).

(Sayer & Studd, 2006, p174)

The relevance of Kolb's Experiential Learning styles in the learning styles of design students was also noted in an article by Demirbaş and Demirkan (2008), where they state that "The learning cycle was a recursive one that uses experiencing, reflecting, thinking and acting". Clearly, the experiential aspects were concepts that I needed to try and incorporate into my project.

In category two, the few articles that were retrieved dealt with object-based learning in museums. However, one conference paper did explore the pedagogical power of object-based learning within both museum and University settings. As already identified above in relation to design students, the author posits that "object-based learning in higher education draws on many of the learning strategies already known to inform students, including active learning and experiential learning" (Chatterjee,2009, p179).

Additionally, some of these articles covered the meanings that are ascribed to objects in both a modern-day consumer sense but also as a means of narrating the past. The use of such objects was a key aspect of the "circles of context" process as it involved using a physical object as a

means of stimulating thought and discussion amongst the student group concerned.

The essence of object meaning is summed up by Kleine and Kernan (2001) where they propose that:

Meaning is a perception or interpretation of an object. Meaning is not inherent in the object itself; rather it arises from the interaction of an individual, object and context and it is inherently symbolic, subjective, psychological and perceptual

(Kleine & Kernan, 2001, p312)

In using physical objects as starting points on an information journey, my intention was to use them to “inspire discussion, group work and lateral thinking-all essential key, transferable, skills in higher education” (Chatterjee, 2009,p179).

Thus, objects are used in a dynamic way whereby the viewer is able to use the various perspectives offered to stimulate creativity and imagination through interpretation and re-interpretation of meaning. (Pearce, 2010).

As may be deduced from what has been written so far, the “Circles of context” pilot takes a constructivist approach to learning as described below by Scott (2011), where she states that

We must move away from purely teacher-centred instruction in which students are regarded as passive receptors of knowledge and toward student-centred approaches in which learners explore ideas related to their own insights

(Scott, 2011, p192)

Whilst the article cited above described the use of constructivism in the context of music education, it was particularly useful for me in the context of textile students, as it drew both on constructivist theory coupled with active learning as a method. Throughout the exercise, students participated in the iterative processes of recognising information need, construction, execution and evaluation of searches. As part of this active learning process, they were able to engage in activities, then reflect and discuss why they were doing them. Had there been a greater number of students signed up for my project, my intention was to have divided them into groups and follow the some of Vygotsky's Social Development Theory (1978). This would have involved myself and the lecturer acting as MKOS (More knowledgeable others) in assisting the students to take control of the learning whilst ascribing their own meanings to the concepts under examination.

However, the low number of students made this impractical, so I was unable to pursue this route.

What are “Circles of Context”?

In general, Art/Design/Fashion/Textiles students do not respond well to traditional “chalk and talk” methods of learning about library resources. This may stem from the fact that many of the databases are very text-based and a number of librarians demonstrate their use through a lecture-demonstration type approach. This renders the students as passive rather than active learners and may well have a de-motivating effect.

Having read around the subject, I wanted to try and teach the students about resources that they could use for their dissertation in a more appealing and engaging way, working on the assumption that many of them were likely to be visual/kinaesthetic learners with a preference for images and textures rather than words. Also, it was crucial that the information searching aspect was directly related to a subject that interested the student.

Who, what, where, when and how?

The main tenet of the “Circles of Context” is that it uses physical objects to encourage the students to think about the “who, what, where, when and how” of that object. Thus, it attempts to set the object within its social, political, economic and cultural contexts. This linked very clearly my attempts to engage the students via the path suggested by Pearce (2010) where she suggests that:

As the viewer stands in front of the show case, he makes use of the various perspectives which the object offers him....his imagination is engaged, and the dynamic process of interpretation and re-interpretation begins, which extends beyond the mere perception of what the object is.

(Pearce, 2010, p136)

I contacted an academic colleague in the School of Art, Design and Architecture who was interested in my suggestion. Following discussion, we decided that we would facilitate the sessions in May with the current second-year Textiles students as it would then inform their Textile Technical Module. This is an important module which is akin to a third year dissertation. As part of their assignment brief for this, students had to demonstrate:

Evidence of a wide range of appropriate and well researched contemporary information.
Highly relevant for the project purpose in scale and comprehension supported by appropriate reading list. Well-developed and structured analysis that leads to clear synthesis of information

(University of Huddersfield, 2014, p1)

In order to fulfil this assessment, students needed to demonstrate a number of high level information skills, particularly in relation to synthesis of information. It became clear from my discussions with the Lecturer that in general, students struggled with searching/evaluating/synthesising information as they relied too heavily upon websites and “easy to find” materials via Google, but paid little heed to the quality or provenance of what they retrieved. Despite several sessions in their first year, the Lecturer felt that they knew very little of the subscribed resources within the Library.

I decided to use a workshop-style format as I felt that we needed an informal setting. Also, we used a room in the Library that was unfamiliar to the students, so that it took them out of the customary classroom setting where they would normally have had Information skills sessions. The sessions were intended to run over two weeks of 1.5 hours each. Prior to the first session, I spoke with the students to find out some of the difficulties they perceived in using Library resources, and also to explain how the sessions might help them. As part of this, I had created a short [video clip](#) with the intention of gaining their attention and hopefully encouraging them to sign up for the sessions which would be held in their own time. Before leaving the introductory session, I handed out more information about the project, its intentions and how we would run it. (see Appendix 1- Guidelines for students) The Lecturer handed them a “sign up” sheet with alternate dates and seventeen students signed up to attend.

The date of the session duly arrived; however, we were disappointed to find that only six students had actually turned up. As mentioned, the original plan had been to run this over two weeks, but we decided to cover it within one day. This was the plan:

- | | |
|--------------|---|
| 11:00 | Meet students outside library turnstiles. Introduction in the Seminar Room. Floor 3 |
| 11:00-11:05: | Brief introduction (Antony) to “Circles of Context” and Learning Outcomes |
| 11:05-11:15 | Short Powerpoint on Mindmapping (Antony) and discussion with students |
| 11:15-11:20. | “Denim” as an example to use in this context (Karen to bring a mannequin and some Denim examples) |
| 11:20-11:30 | Students have a go at mind mapping using their own ideas for their project (we have some examples if they can’t think of anything (Antony and Karen to have topics ready) See Appendix 2: Preparatory Topics for discussion |
| 11:30-11:45 | Antony splits students into groups to look at some different types of information resources and what they are useful for (to stimulate discussion about how they use them) |
| 11:45-12:00 | Quick demonstration: Finding different types of resources using Summon and other databases (Antony) |
| 12:00-12:10 | Re-cap on what we have done and split students into groups of 3 or 4 (depending on numbers) asking them to go away and use some of our resources to find information on a topic of their choice using the “Circles of context” framework (Denim may be one of these, but they may want to try out a topic area of their own) The students need to organise themselves so that they work effectively and one of them must be prepared to report back in the afternoon giving details of their topic, which keywords they used, where they looked, what they found, plus useful hints and tips to colleagues and sharing good practice. |
| 12:10-12:15 | Any questions? |
| 12:15 | Students go off for lunch and they have until 3pm to complete their searches |
| 3:00-4:00 | Students re-assemble in the (Trend hub or elsewhere- to be decided) for the feedback session |

How did it go?

Despite the initial disappointment about the low numbers which meant that we couldn't really do the group work as planned for the information searching, we started by showing them the video clip and explaining about the circles of context and what we wanted them to do. The students seemed to engage well with the mind-mapping. The lecturer had brought in an example of a denim jacket, and also a costume from the exhibition so that we had some "physical objects" to talk about. The fact that there were fewer of them meant that we could talk to them on an individual basis about their ideas for their topics. They drew their own mind maps to identify gaps in their knowledge and we discussed the individual mind-maps as a group. For the next part of the morning, I used coloured cards which contained the names of several different types of resources (for example, journal article, newspaper, book) and asked the students to match them with various criteria (for example, good for up-to-date information, useful for an overview of a subject). Whilst this was not in the original lesson outline, it did serve to compliment the discussion about resources, and the students were able to identify the different resources using the LibGuides

Following some brief demonstrations of different resources, I then asked them to seek and retrieve some information relating to their chosen topic and report back on which resources they had used, what type of information they had found, and where they had struggled to find anything. I also asked them to think about the "Who, what, where, why and how" as described in the "Circles of Context"

Later in the afternoon, each brought back the books that they had retrieved and reported back on some electronic resources they had used. Where they had not been successful, we were able to work through how they could have constructed their search strategies to have yielded better results. They all participated in this process and gained useful information along the way. They reported surprise at the amount of types of resources available to them and realised that they had to look further than just images and web sites for their resources. The lecturer was able to advise them on relating their search to the areas where they felt that they were lacking. The students helped each other out in the discussions by commenting on resources that they had found useful of which the others were perhaps unaware.

From my perspective, the involvement and presence of the lecturer was a key thing in ensuring that the session ran smoothly. Given that the project had been designed from the assignment brief, the lecturer was able to speak with the students from that perspective and involve the resources angle in that as well. Once again, this placed the resources within the wider context of what the students were expected to do.

Evaluations from the students

Following a general discussion with the students about how they felt the session had gone, I asked them to think of two things they had learned and one that they would like to know more about

What they had learned

- There's more than just books in the library
- To think outside the box and not just use image search for design work
- To use mind maps to help organise confusing ideas and stimulate discussion
- There's more to Summon than I originally thought
- Use the temporary folder to save references in APA referencing style, then email it to yourself

What they needed more information about

- Narrowing down your search
- How to use the LibGuides
- Referencing
- Searching the Vogue Archive

Conclusion

The students said that they had enjoyed actually doing some activities in relation to their information search and had learned quite a bit about searching for both print and electronic books. They demonstrated enthusiasm for the activities and engaged with the idea of contextualization with regard to the projects they intended to do

The involvement of the Lecturer was invaluable, as she was able to speak to them about design techniques and features that were outside my area of expertise. The fact that we worked together in planning and delivering the session helped the students to link their information need to the assessment brief and see it as part of the research process in design, rather than an isolated exercise that was purely for academic work.

The "Circles of Context" approach is transferable to any of the Fashion and Textiles areas and we have already begun to consider how we can do this as part of an overall information skills plan across the three years of these courses. In addition, it may be possible to extend the whole concept to other courses in the Art/Design/Architecture subject areas where physical objects can be used. Their relevance and meaning were re-imagined and re-interpreted via the students' own experiences and knowledge, thus contributing to their learning

Whilst the importance of the physical objects should not be underestimated and is the ideal scenario for this type of work, where these are not available, then a picture or cut-out could be used instead. We have already started to explore some of the materials in our Archives materials collection to see if they may be suitable.

Finally, I will conclude with the comment from the member of academic staff who worked with me on the project. After we had finished the session, she contacted me to say:

I just wanted to say thanks so much for your work in getting the workshop together. Hope you managed to get something from it despite the low numbers. The students certainly did. In some ways I think that went in our favour as it was good to work with just one group and spend a bit of concentrated time with them. I was wondering though if you had any thoughts on how we could take forward and where there may be scope for further collaboration and development. I am meeting up colleagues next week to go through planning for next year and I would really like to factor in some resources and library type sessions. Thanks once again

(Shah, personal communication, June 25, 2014)

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Appendices

Appendix 1- Guidelines for Students

Circles of Context - What are they about?

Learning Outcomes: After this two-part workshop you will be able to:

- Recognize your information need in relation to your project
- Use mind-mapping to help construct your search strategy
- Search for and critically evaluate information from a variety of appropriate sources
- Synthesise the information in order to help structure your argument
- Reference the sources of information you have used

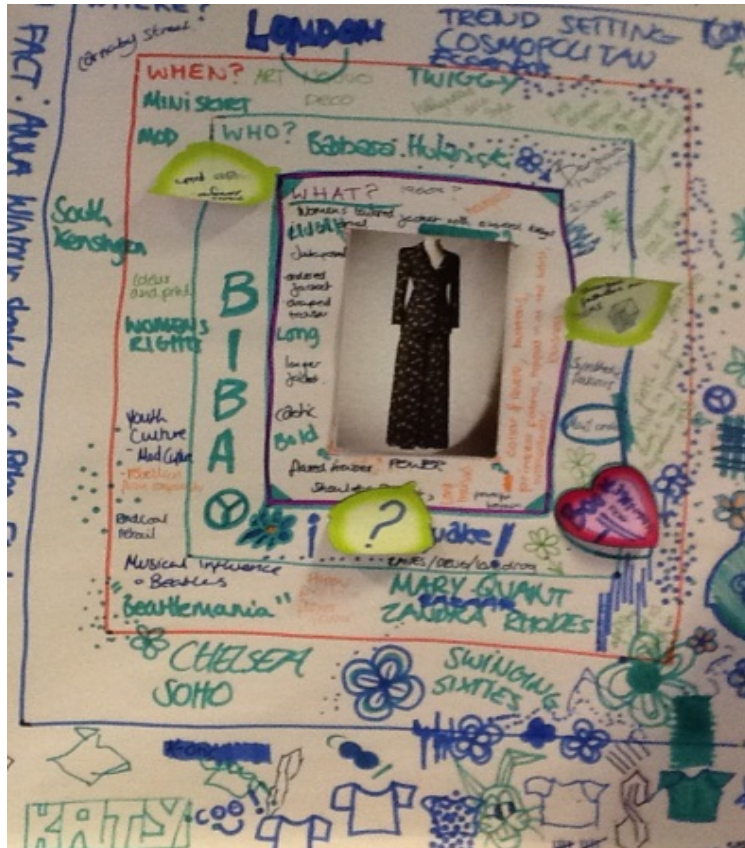
What does this mean?

We want to help you broaden your thinking using “circles of context” whereby the object/material you choose or the idea that you have for your project is surrounded by the words “**who, what, when, where, why and how**”. This is a way of digging into the socio-cultural background of your project

As part of your assignment, you’ll need to find appropriate documentary evidence and materials from a variety of reputable resources. This might include:

- Books (as sources of inspiration)
- Journal articles,
- Internet sources (e.g. blogs & wikis)
- Case studies – (particularly of fashion designers , companies, production methods, company reports),
- Documentaries,
- Magazines (contemporary and historical), newspapers, personal experiences/narratives, museum catalogues

Before you start to search for information, you need to know what to look for. We will use mind-mapping to do this. Here is an example:



So how do I find this material?

The University subscribes to a wide variety of sources, the trick is to know where and how to look for them. A good place to start is with our [LibGuides](http://hud.libguides.com) (<http://hud.libguides.com>) which will point you to some useful resources. You will see a variety of these for Art, Design and Architecture (including Textile crafts and Textile surface and design), but don't forget that you might need to look at business and marketing too (and also history!) Inside the LibGuides, there are introductions to [Summon](https://library3.hud.ac.uk/summon) (<https://library3.hud.ac.uk/summon>) from where you'll be able to search for books and articles across all subject areas.

Newspapers

Use Proquest International Newsstand for a wide range of newspapers, which are always good for providing background and context. You can find them on the A-Z list of electronic resources on the [Summon Homepage](#). Look under "P" for ProQuest.

Want something a bit further back? [Try 19th Century Newspapers](#) and 19th Century Periodicals, or how about the Picture Post historical Archive?

(<http://hud.libguides.com/content.php?pid=333102&sid=2994569>)

You'll probably be familiar with blogs here are a couple of examples [American Duchess](http://americanduchess.blogspot.co.uk/p/about-me.html) (<http://americanduchess.blogspot.co.uk/p/about-me.html>) which is all about womens' historical costuming women's clothing from the 16th century all the way through to the 1960s. Here is a link to some [textile design blogs](http://www.dexigner.com/directory/cat/Textile-Design/Blogs.html) (<http://www.dexigner.com/directory/cat/Textile-Design/Blogs.html>)

Have you used "[My Suitcase](#)"?

(http://mysuitcase.hud.ac.uk/?doing_wp_cron=1400073607.7878348827362060546875) Two of

your lecturers have produced it and it contains some garment case studies

Remember to “Look around” and don’t restrict yourself to only a few tried and trusted resources. When you’re looking at the context of a particular piece or idea, you need to search in other areas outside your own. It’s like being a detective. Talking of which, be careful what you trust on the web. Here’s a link to help you decide what’s trustworthy and what isn’t. [Internet detective](http://www.vtstutorials.ac.uk/detective/)
<http://www.vtstutorials.ac.uk/detective/>

OK, so what next?

For the second part of the workshop, we’d like you to have had a look around, found some information and be prepared to share your thoughts with us and the rest of your group. Specifically:

- What process you went through to develop your search?
- Which resources you used for your project?
- What type of information was it useful for
- Whether you trusted the information, if not why not?
- If you have any hints and tips for your peer group

Good luck! We look forward to hearing about your information journey.

Appendix 2: Preparatory topics for discussion

Renaissance textiles

- Bricade techniques
- Chintz
- Black market

Embellishment

- Embroidery
- Beading
- Fashion Designers who use

Tie Dye

- Designer who use
- Connotations and meaning
- History and cultural significance
- Hippy movement / Subcultures

Global traditions in textile weaving

- Symbolism
- Ikat (Indonesian textiles)

Theories on status in 18th/19th century

Ethics

- Fast fashion/slow fashion

Tattoos

- Opinions on
- Gang tattoos/symbolism
- Fashion designer who use

Knitting

- Handmade
- Craft
- (Design) Activism
- 1940's/1950s

Sustainable fashion

- Upcycling
- Make Do and mend

Globalisation and Consumerism

- Ethics in production
- Social and environmental issues

Tribes and subcultures

Storytelling through weaving and textiles in general

Resources

List of resources that students feel will help in their research and what they have struggled to find/access.

