Browsing as an Information-Seeking Process

In a seminal study on the information seeking behaviour of artists, Susie Cobbledick concluded that these researchers have five distinct information needs, two of which rely heavily on images and media.[1] All four of her artist participants mentioned browsing books at either academic or public libraries. However, they all also cite various impediments to browsing in academic libraries. The sculptor found browsing "ineffective" because the "good books" get lost amid the dated "very boring books" or are "off in oversized books or special collections."[2] Two other artists mention academic libraries are "unfriendly" and "just not easy" to navigate.[3]

William Hemmig built on Cobbledick's research, first through a literature review,[4] and then in his own study identifying four themes that describe how artists and designers fulfill these needs: the pattern of needs is idiosyncratic, there is often an exploration of non-art information, there is a preference for browsing, and a preference for using personal networks as a source of information.[5] He notes that the most-sought sources for inspiration and visual reference require "passive information acquisition," suggesting that browsing is a primary information-seeking behavior, if perhaps unnoticed or unarticulated as a research method by the artists.[6]

In 2011, Helen Mason and Lyn Robinson conducted a study on the information seeking behaviours of emerging artists and designers - new practitioners who had recently completed an academic art or design program.[7] While they start a library search in the catalog, many of them then chose an area of the stacks to browse. All of their participants use books as part of their artistic practice, mainly reading for inspiration or to find certain images or visual references.[8]

Art and design students may have different information-seeking behaviors than practitioners because they conduct research largely to complete an assignment. The structure and requirements of the assignment may dictate the sources needed. However, Polly Frank studied student artists' use of the academic library and, not surprisingly, the students she spoke with reported browsing as one of their main search strategies.[9] Students would start a search in the

[1] Cobbledick, Susie. "The Information Seeking Behavior of Artists: Exploratory Interviews." *The Library Quarterly* 66, no. 4 (October 1996): 343-372.

[2] Ibid, 357.

[3] Ibid, 357-358.

[4] Hemmig, William S. "The Information-Seeking Behavior of Visual Artists: A Literature Review." *Journal of Documentation* 64, no. 3 (2008): 343-362.

[5] Hemmig, William. "An Empirical Study of the Information-Seeking Behavior of Practicing Visual Artists." *Journal of Documentation* 65, no. 4 (2009): 684.

[6] Ibid, 695.

[7] Mason, Helen and Lyn Robinson. "The Information-Related Behaviour of Emerging Artists and Designers: Inspiration and Guidance for New Practitioners." *Journal of Documentation* 67, no. 1 (2011): 159-180.

[8] Ibid, 166.

[9] Frank, Polly. "Student Artists in the Library: An Investigation of How They Use General Academic Libraries for Their Creative Needs." *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 25, no. 6 (November 1999): 445-455.

library catalog, but only use one or two call numbers as reference to get started browsing the shelves.[10] Notably, Frank found that students literally do judge a book by its cover, telling her about their reaction to artwork and titles on book covers and artwork illustrated throughout.[11] Color imagery and overall condition of a book were also factors in browsing. One astute student described browsing as "visual critical thinking" while another remarked, "I didn't know what I was after, but I found it anyway."[12]

We know from these reviewed studies (and others) that browsing is an important discovery system for artists and designers. This is a particularly important for finding sources of inspiration and finding specific images and media. Laurel Littrell emphasized this in her ACRL presentation on artists in the academic library. She found that most library designs impede browsing, particularly in the arts.[13] Many of the art and design books are oversized, shelved in a different location from the regular-sized books. At many academic libraries, students need to go to at least two areas of the stacks to see all the books within one call number range. Media resources such as DVDs and CDs are not always in open shelving but if they are, are shelved separately from the books. We begin to see how navigating the physical space of the academic library can be daunting for art and design students.

The Information Literacy Classroom for Studio-based Students
Randy Burke Hensley wrote a guest column for *Reference & User Services Quarterly* on how curiosity and creativity are attributes of information literacy.[14] He asks librarians to model curiosity by focusing on the person they are with, using humor and positivity in conversation with the person, and taking pleasure in learning and showing it.[15] He says we also need to change our attitude toward curiosity's adversary: fear of risk and failure. We should "foster an environment that allows students to experience the problematic nature of information use and evaluation."[16]

bell hooks notes that when teachers take risks they are creating an active learning community. She calls this "engaged pedagogy." (*Teaching Critical Thinking: Practical Wisdom*, New York: Routledge, 2010, p.21)

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[10] Ibid, 450.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid, 451.

[13] Littrell, Laurel. "Artists: The Neglected Patrons?" *ACRL Tenth Annual Conference, March 15-18, 2001, Denver, Colorado*, 293. http://www.ala.org/acrl/sites/ala.org.acrl/files/content/conferences/pdf/littrell.pdf

[14] Burke Hensley, Randy. "Curiosity and Creativity as Attributes of Information Literacy." *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 44, no. 1 (2004): 31-36.

[15] Ibid, 32.

[16] Ibid.

Burke Hensley references Perry's article on curiosity in early childhood education and how Perry describes ways that innate curiosity fades as children's responses to exploration are thwarted.[17] hooks also recollects how children are encouraged to wonder aloud and engage their imaginations. Yet as children grow, they are taught to recognize imagination as "a force that could possibly impede knowledge acquisition. While she acknowledges this force may be absent in art and design educational pathways, we can see how our educational system diminishes wonder in even the most creative of students. (*Teaching Critical Thinking: Practical Wisdom*, New York: Routledge, 2010, p.60)

Perhaps one of the stigmas around browsing is that we associate curiosity with childlike-wonder, in direct opposition to scholarly pursuits. Yet, open-ended learning experiences, where there are no (necessarily) right answers, fosters discovery within an inquiry-based classroom. This is an environment that encourages students to ask "why" rather than "how."[18]
Bring back in when discussing contextualization
Burke Hensley reflects on creativity and curiosity as largely individual pursuits. Information literacy, in contrast, is often a skillset we attempt to impart to classrooms of students.[19] As librarians are given opportunities for one-shot information literacy sessions, how can we teach the individuals that comprise the classroom? "We must accept that we are teaching to affect the individual intellect, how individuals think about the use of information, not how the masses use skills to locate it."[20]

Budd notes that in the humanities browsing as a process is as important as the scholarly output and that browsing is an individual pursuit, stating "Since the act of creation is a personal one, the act of examining the creation also tends to be personal." (Budd, J. M. "Research in the Two Cultures: The Nature of Scholarship in Science and the Humanities." *Collection Management*, 11, no. 3/4 (1989), p. 10

Instructional Design & Implementation for Photography Students
Within the curious and creative classroom, three key documents lay the foundation of my information literacy instruction for art and design students. The first one is the most recently produced, the Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education.[21] Like Garcia and Labatte, I consider the threshold concept Searching as Strategic Exploration an excellent

[17] Perry, Bruce D. "Curiosity: The Fuel of Development." *Scholastic Early Childhood Today* 15, no. 6 (March 2001): 22-23.
[18] Burke-Hensley, "Curiosity and Creativity as Attributes of Information Literacy,"32.
[19] Ibid, 33.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Association of College & Research Libraries, "Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education," *Association of College & Research Libraries*, 2015. Accessed January 14, 2017. http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework.

metaphor for browsing.[22] As an example, my instruction planning for introductory photography students begins with this concept, which articulates that searching for information is a fluid, repetitive process that requires "mental flexibility" on the part of the searcher.[23] The novice researcher learns to adjust their strategy based on results, to understand that information is contextualized, and to be open to serendipitous or unexpected results that may open new research pathways. Browsing is specifically mentioned as a disposition.[24]

While browsing seems to be a basic research skill, it must be taught to students who are unfamiliar with research practices for inspiration wayfinding and do not yet know how to navigate an academic library. This is why ARLIS/NA's Information Competencies for Students in Design Disciplines, that articulate basic, intermediate, and advanced skill sets for studio-based disciplines, consider browsing both a basic and intermediate skill for all design students.[25] At the basic skill-level students should learn to locate books in the library, understand a library's book classification system, and "browse for books;" browsing the new books shelves is an intermediate skill.[26]

In introductory photography classes, I provide students with students a handout that explains the Library of Congress call number TR, breaking down prominent sections of the call number by subjects including history and technology, works of individual photographs, architectural photography, fashion photography, and photojournalism. Armed with just this knowledge, students explore the stacks to find artists monographs and books on photo history and techniques. They are driven to select sources based on their own interest and curiosity. I circulate throughout the stacks to help students find certain call number ranges or to search our catalog for works by a specific artist or technique. During this time, I am able to speak with individual students and facilitate each one's unique browsing activity. Some students will find one book and spend the class period absorbing it cover to cover while others will return to the stacks again and again, creating a personal library that they then share with the class.

Browsing is a method of access to images found in photography books. Once students find books of interest, photographic image composition, layout, and textual analysis as framed by the format must be considered. How does an exhibition catalog or artist monograph contextualize the images? Another threshold concept, Information Creation as Process, informs this conversation.

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[22] Garcia and Labatte, Threshold Concepts as Metaphors," 242.
[23] Association of College & Research Libraries, "Framework," 9.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Brown, Jeanne et al. *Information Competencies for Students in Design Disciplines*. ARLIS/NA, 2007. Accessed January 19. 2017. https://www.arlisna.org/publications/arlis-na-research-reports/148-information-competencies-for-students-in-design-disciplines
[26] Ibid, 12, 23.

[27] However, because the ACRL Visual Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education directly address access and interpretation of images, I turn to this third document in designing this part of instruction.[28]

Created to complement the now rescinded ACRL Information Literacy Standards for Higher Education, the Visual Literacy Standards include performance indicators and learning outcomes for developing visual literacy skills. Like the threshold concept Searching as Strategic Exploration, a number of the Standards' indicators and outcomes also address browsing. Standard One is "the visually literate student determines the nature and extent of the visual materials needed" includes exploring, investigating, and identifying image sources.[29] Standard Two, in which the student "finds and accesses" images and media "effectively and efficiently" indicates browsing as an exploratory process for finding images.[30] Though the Standards cover locating and accessing images, they are most meaningful in designing instruction focused on the interpretation, use, and creation of images.

Standard Three of the Visual Literacy Standards describes the visually literate student as one who can interpret and analyze image meaning as identified by the image source and technical components, cultural and social contexts, and can validate this meaning through discussion and further research.[31] After students have pulled a number of books, we begin to explore the book as a format that can influence how we contextualize photography. I use the books students have pulled and find examples of page spreads where one photograph can inform another. I discuss curator or media scholars' essays being included in exhibition catalogs. Students then browse through their chosen books finding interesting images and essays. The session concludes with students asking (and answering) one another's critical questions about publishing in the photography discipline and sharing observations regarding compelling discoveries.

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[27] Association of College & Research Libraries, "Framework," 5.
[28] Hattwig, Denise et al. *ACRL Visual Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education*. ACRL, 2011. Accessed January 19, 2017. http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/visualliteracy
[29] Ibid.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid.