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In with the Old: Encouraging Archives Use with Innovative Faculty Outreach

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In with the Old: Encouraging Archives Use with Innovative Faculty Outreach

Abstract

In order to encourage archives usage, an instruction librarian and archivist at a small community college collaborated to design an interactive instruction session for faculty. The session was to use breakout boxes to demonstrate how to incorporate archival materials into classroom activities at an institution wide professional development workshop event. Plans for an in-person breakout box session were scrapped after the COVID-19 Omicron wave forced workshops online. After designing and carrying out an online archives introduction, the session was reconfigured back into an in-person session utilizing breakout boxes. Despite lower-than-expected attendance, the innovative outreach made faculty and staff aware of the fledgling archives and provided new methods of providing outreach to faculty and staff.

Keywords

Collaboration, Outreach, Breakout Boxes, Archives, Instruction

Introduction

In 2017, the Butler Community College Archives were established, but because of minimal institutional knowledge, usage of the collection had been limited. Using the lack of institutional knowledge as an opportunity for collaboration, in the spring of 2022, an instruction librarian and archivist/librarian designed an innovative outreach project for faculty that would promote the Archives, demonstrate how to incorporate Archive materials in the classroom, and give basic library and research instruction. Librarians planned the session to be fully interactive, given during a day of college-wide professional development workshops. The interactive element would allow faculty to run around the Library and explore the Archives; however, the COVID-19 Omicron wave forced librarians to shift the activity to an online format a week before it was scheduled. Following the online sessions, the Librarians revisited the original idea and utilized breakout boxes.

Literature Review

In recent years, escape rooms have risen in popularity as an immersive form of entertainment for all ages. Participants race against the clock to solve puzzles and riddles in order to escape themed rooms. Libraries have embraced this concept and taken advantage of its popularity by creating their own escape rooms, becoming a breakout trend in youth programming (O'Reilly, 2016). Academic libraries have also used the interactive nature of escape rooms to introduce the library and its services to students in a way that fosters critical-thinking and problem-solving (Jane & Maughan, 2020). The company BreakOut EDU has capitalized on the success of breakout rooms by providing a breakout kit for librarians and educators, meant to be a customizable escape room in a box (Kroski, 2019). Each breakout kit includes boxes and resettable locks that can be set with numbers, shapes, colors and symbols. The kit also contains an invisible ink pen and black light for writing out secret messages that can only be revealed with the use of a black light. The highly customizable capabilities of breakout boxes have made them a popular tool for educators who want to add a gaming element to instruction.

One of the barriers to getting students into the library revolves around faculty, and especially adjunct faculty, who are often unfamiliar with what libraries offer (Ovadia, 2014; Leeder & Lonn, 2014). Providing outreach to faculty is therefore essential to promote library services. Like libraries, archives tend to be unfamiliar to students and faculty, making outreach a great tool to inform patrons of its services. In a survey conducted at Wesleyan University, the author found that a majority of respondents, who had little to no experience with archives, thought of them as something mysterious and dark (Patterson, 2016). Another study found that archives are usually less used and more intimidating to both faculty and students, but when students are exposed to archives, they are more likely to use them again in the future (Lewallen, 2019).

Background

Butler Community College (BCC) is located in southeast Kansas with an FTE of 4,400 students in over 110 degree and certificate programs. Over 140 full-time and adjunct faculty teach courses at BCC's eight campus locations. BCC offers courses face-to-face, online, and, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, in a blended format.

BCC recognizes the need for continuing education in order to increase the quality of classroom instruction and encourages its full-time and adjunct faculty to participate in professional development opportunities. Those who do can earn stipend awards and salary increases after completing a set amount of credit hours. The Office of Faculty Development at Butler provides training and workshops throughout the year that count towards these hours. Instruction librarians at Butler present workshops and training on a variety of Library resources during most, if not all, Faculty Development events. The largest events

are Professional Development Days (PDD), which occur twice a year over the week before fall and spring semesters. Institutional Development Day (IDD) is a daylong twice yearly in-service geared towards full-time and adjunct faculty, administration, and staff regarding both professional and personal development.

Goals

The main objective of the collaborative project was to bring awareness of Archive materials and of BCC's history to faculty and demonstrate how to incorporate these materials into a classroom setting. Secondary goals were to engage faculty at all levels of familiarity with Library resources, increase institutional awareness of the Archive's holdings and of BCC's history, and to provide a low-stakes, interactive session that did not rely on lecture to inform faculty of what the Library and Archive had to offer. Using breakout boxes fulfilled all our main objectives. While the boxes offered a way to create an interactive activity, they also served to familiarize our participants with the Library and Archives while also allowing faculty to work together towards a common goal.

Synchronous Online Experience

Overview

The breakout box session was in its final planning stages for the mid-January PDD when Faculty Development notified the Library that the event was going online due to the rising number of confirmed cases of the Omicron strain. With only a week before the event, the librarians had to shift course to design an online session. Creating a digital escape room was the first alternative considered, as it is an online version of an escape room. Librarians rejected the idea as a digital escape room would have required a substantial amount of time to put together and would have forced participants to work alone. Since the only Archival materials available online were scans of the BCC yearbooks, we decided to scale down the session to focus on introducing the Archives through Butler trivia.

The PDD Session

The session started with an overview of how the Libraries established the Archives, with pictures of the space serving as a quick tour. Then faculty were given trivia questions about BCC's history. In the interest of time, these questions were multiple-choice in order to keep guessing from taking up too much of the session. The questions spanned different points in Butler history campus groups, activities, dates, and notable people. After 10 questions, faculty then received a brief tutorial on how to access the yearbook website. Librarians then divided Faculty into groups and assigned a specific yearbook to explore. Faculty also received a worksheet that consisted of more trivia style questions. These questions were not multiple choice and instead, faculty had to explore their assigned yearbook for the answers. The Librarians brought the group back together and each group shared their findings. With the remaining time, faculty explored yearbooks that piqued their interest. Librarians also asked BCC alumni to see if they could find themselves or colleagues in the yearbooks.

The PDD session was offered again in February during a Second Saturday. Second Saturdays are a day of professional development workshops that serve to reach adjuncts who cannot come to campus during the week. Second Saturdays are provided in a hybrid format so that faculty and adjuncts can attend in-person or join via Zoom.

In-Person Experience

After PDD, Faculty Development contacted the Librarians inviting them to do an in-person activity for IDD. IDD shifts the audience from exclusively faculty to include staff as well. Broadening the audience called for a recalculation concerning what level of library or archival knowledge everyone would have. With faculty, we assumed most had used a Library database or the Library catalog in their classes, but we could not assume the same level of familiarity with staff. This shift presented difficulties in figuring out how to design an appropriately challenging task but offered the benefits of bringing institutional awareness of the Archives and Library to a wider audience.

The planning phase of an in-person activity was vastly different from an exclusively online experience. The session was scheduled for 50 minutes, and timing was a large determiner in how many activities could be included in the session. For each task and puzzle we added, we had to estimate how long it would take to complete. After many calculations, three tasks were agreed upon for the session.

While narrative structure is not required, research links narrative with player motivation and helps build structure for the tasks (Salen & Zimmerman, 2003). To include some narrative structure for the tasks, participants received a letter that outlined a secret treasure hidden on campus that past librarians and archivists had kept secret since the year Butler was established. The participants' job was to find and decipher the clues left behind by the original librarian, which had remained hidden among Butler's historical collections and within the Library itself. The narrative also helped to guide the progression of subsequent tasks and acted as a place to hide hints.

The three tasks revolved around highlighting physical materials in the Library, the Archive space itself, and online Archival holdings in the form of the Butler yearbooks. Once completed, each task would unlock a corresponding lock on a box. Participants would find more clues and puzzles after opening a box. After all locks were unlocked, participants could complete the final task to "breakout" of the room.

Archival Photocopies hid the combination to the first box's lock in invisible ink. After opening the first lock, participants would find crossword puzzles and decoder cards. In the interest of not reinventing the wheel, the questions from the yearbook trivia were converted into a crossword puzzle. After filling in the crossword puzzle, participants would need to use the black light to reveal highlighted letters. Once unscrambled, the letters formed a word that opened one of the breakout box's locks. This portion required laptops, as the participants would need to get online to view the yearbooks. Once the first puzzle was completed, participants found their next clues in the form of homemade decoder cards. The decoder cards were blank 5x7" cards that had boxes cut out in seemingly random places along with a book's title and page number. Using the Library's catalog, participants had to find the books on the shelf and navigate to the correct page. Placing the decoder on the page would reveal part of a hidden message in the cutouts. Putting together each of the hidden messages presented participants with their final task. The final task was to bring the archivist the secret code that would allow participants into the Archives to retrieve the key to their treasure.

After all puzzles were completed and the story instructions were printed, we assembled the boxes. At this point, other BCC librarians tested the boxes to ensure the instructions made sense and that the tasks could be completed within 50 minutes. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the librarians completed the boxes in 20 minutes. After fixing some minor issues with vague directions and an issue with the invisible ink blending in too much with its background, the boxes were ready for our IDD participants to try.

Results

Participation in the original synchronous Zoom session was lower than expected, with only 11 faculty members attending. Faculty received an evaluation form, created by the Faculty Development department, to their emails at the end of the session. Unfortunately, only two of the 11 faculty members filled out the evaluation form, but both rated the session highly. One professor stated they would like to use the yearbooks in their history course while the other mentioned that while they enjoyed the session, Zoom was perhaps not the best way to present the information.

For the In-Person session there were eight participants, with two being staff and the other six being adjunct or full-time faculty. This allowed for two groups of four to try the breakout boxes. During the session, both groups successfully completed the boxes using the entirety of the 50-minute period. During the session, participants relayed that they were glad to have a chance to move around. Their previous sessions had all entailed sitting and listening to speakers, and they enjoyed the chance to be active participants. One participant even requested a breakout box session for their upcoming staff retreat. Faculty Development again emailed participants the evaluation form after the event, but unfortunately, we received no responses.

Discussion

Overall, the use of breakout boxes in library instruction as a way of innovating outreach to instructors and increasing institutional knowledge of the Archives was a success, though there were many lessons learned and room for improvement. Increased evaluation and feedback are greatly needed to fine-tune the boxes' creation and session planning. The fact that no faculty or staff responded to the request to fill out the evaluation forms days after the session suggests that it is not the optimal option. Instead, we would like to try designing and distributing our own evaluation form immediately after participants finish the activity.

In terms of lessons learned from creating the boxes, we found that testing the activities beforehand is imperative to make sure the activity can be completed in time. Including someone who has never tried a breakout box or who has less familiarity with library resources would have given us better time estimates for each task. While humor can add some much-needed lightness to instruction, it can be misleading and pass over participants' heads. Next time, we would avoid the inclusion of pop culture references because in our session it created some unnecessary confusion for all participants. While the intended audience was all faculty, there is the option of seeking out specific faculty or departments that already use primary sources in their courses. Finally, since participation was low, offering the session in the future could potentially reach other faculty that could not make it to the event the first time around.

Conclusion

The collaboration between the Archives and Instruction Librarian introduced new ideas and possibilities for future collaborative outreach to faculty. While the number of faculty reached fell below initial goals, there were connections made with staff members that we had not previously considered as benefiting from the outreach. While designing a full breakout box may not be for everyone, librarians and archivists can still tailor their outreach to include more interactive elements. Faculty need to be engaged just as much as students do when coming to the library for instruction. What better way to show what the library has to offer than to let faculty try it out for themselves?

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