Of BOOKS & BYTES

Interdisciplinary Constellations and Visual Information

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Twenty-first century culture is largely visually inspired. Children learn the visual grammars of film and television before they can read or write. The current trend in universities has been toward interdisciplinarity of academic departments and schools. The Otto G. Richter Library recently had the opportunity to explore both areas in shaping the University of Miami's Visual Thinking Strategies Institute, a progressive interdisciplinary endeavor between the Lowe Art Museum, Richter Library Faculty, University of Miami School of Education, and Miami-Dade Public Schools.

The institute's purpose was to introduce Miami-Dade elementary educators to interdisciplinary paradigms of visual thinking strategies. Through the Lowe Art Museum's permanent collections and the Otto G. Richter Library's visual information databases, the institute was predicated on discovery and learning 'new visual ways of thinking' through innovative educational methodologies. Through the use of art history and interactive media technologies, teachers were taught new paradigms of 'visual thinking strategies.'

Different from regular compartmentalized educational curricula, the VTS Institute sought to transcend boundaries between disciplines building on University of Miami President Shalala's orientation towards interdisciplinarity. Sparked by Richter's Research and Educational Services, library faculty John Renaud, Ray Uzwyshyn, and Carrie Leslie developed and planned a curriculum over an eight month period with other VTS Institute members, including Lowe Curator of Education Wendy Wolf and the School of Education's Professor Marilyn Neff. Richter Library then provided the Institute with a foundation for learning and a technological

This painting is called *Girl Asleep at a Table*. It is housed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

infrastructure exploiting the Lowe Art Museum, the library's digital resources and Richter's Information Literacy Laboratory. The Institute's rich productivity resulted from a dialogue across traditional academic/library/technology borderlines and collaboration between art historians, educational development specialists, academic database librarians, and library interactive web designers

At the Institute's outset art historians and curators gave sessions on "Image Selection and Aesthetic Development" in tandem with Educational Psychology professors who presented on "Visual Understanding in Education." Richter's Research and Educational Services' Phyllis Robarts and Carrie Leslie deepened theoretical learning with sessions on "Using Online Databases as Art Resources" to "Internet Search Strategies and Image Evaluation." Richter's Webmaster and Web services librarian, Ray Uzwyshyn, then gave the students the opportunity to implement what they had learned through interactive media sessions on "Visual Thinking Strategies and Interactive Design" and "Understanding New Media Design through Visual Principle."

The Institute's final section was a moving event. Students, most of whom had never done web design, showed their colleagues and professors the results of their labors. Older professors and younger student teachers who had worked with faith and perseverance produced web pages on topics ranging from "Women Renaissance Artists" to "Cats and Modernism" to "Chagall and Visual Thinking Strategies."

Bringing the diverse and lively student bunch to new paradigms was not an easy task, but from the response, one from which the group will reap long-term benefit on both theoretical and practical levels.

Look for more cross-disciplinary endeavors as the library continues to push interdisciplinary boundaries in the New Millennium. To see the results of the Institute's online efforts, please visit www.library.miami.edu/vts.