
A Longer Exposure: An Extended Learning Approach to Photograph Conservation Training in Central, Southern, and Eastern Europe

Introduction

In 2008, the Getty Conservation Institute (GCI) joined forces with two institutions in Slovakia; the Academy of Fine Arts and Design (AFAD) in Bratislava and the Slovak National Library (SNL) in Martin, to carry out a three year regional course in central, southern and eastern Europe entitled *Fundamentals of the Conservation of Photographs* (2008 – 2010).

The course was intended to advance the conservation of photographs in the region by teaching new knowledge and skills to a group of professionals responsible for the care of photograph collections, and to stimulate the formulation of a professional community that could move the field forward.

A 2006 needs assessment illustrated the pressing preservation needs of photograph collections in museums, archives, and other institutions in the region and underscored the need for professionals able to provide adequate conservation and care to these collections. Given the scale of these needs it was also clear that, beyond providing new knowledge and practical skills, training activities should also highlight skills such as prioritizing conservation, fundraising, and advocating the value and importance of photographs.

Encouragingly, the assessment identified a significant number of professionals and institutions highly motivated to find ways to improve the care of their collections of photographs, but it also pointed out that opportunities for specialized training and education in the area of photograph conservation were very limited (in fact, the first academic specialization in the conservation of photographs was established at the Academy of Fine Arts and Design, Bratislava in 2006).

The picture that developed through the assessment process also suggested that a program of sustained learning and communication would be most beneficial.

The Course

The objectives of the course *Fundamentals of the Conservation of Photographs* were: to teach relevant knowledge and skills; to build capacity, and; to encourage the growth of a strong regional network of professionals.

The idea of extending the learning experience for participants through sustained communication and activity over several years was a way to pursue all of these objectives in a meaningful way. The course was based on a model of three annual summer schools (each two or three weeks long) with a program of distance learning and capacity building activities between each.



The eighteen participants in the course represented ten countries in the region and a variety of professional backgrounds, including conservators (who comprised about 60% of the group), collections managers, archivists, a conservation scientist and a curator. All shared a record of caring for photograph collections. A passion for photographs and willingness to promote the preservation of photograph collections was also required. With only a few exceptions, the group remained the same throughout the three years of the course.

The *Fundamentals of the Conservation of Photographs* course introduced participants to concepts related to the identification, value and conservation of photographs and photograph collections. Dissemination was also a key theme of the course, and participants were asked periodically to provide information detailing their efforts at outreach, advocacy and collaboration, no matter how modest.

The annual summer schools focused on classroom-based instruction and group discussions and included theoretical and hands-on sessions. An effort was made to keep the program varied; some exercises were staged as competitions (identification of a set of unknown processes; creation of custom storage housings) and recreation of historic processes (salted paper print, cyanotype, platinum print and daguerreotype) during the second and third years of the course. These proved to be both very useful for deepening understanding of photographic processes and also inspirational to participants in other ways that will be described later.

During the eight month “distance mentoring” phase that followed each of the first two summer schools, participants completed a series of assignments designed to help them apply information and knowledge to their own collections and professional practice. At each due date, participants uploaded their assignments to a course website. Two

course instructors took on the role of “mentors,” reviewing the assignments and providing constructive feedback to participants.

The mentors also addressed questions from participants and encouraged others in the group to contribute to solutions through an online discussion forum. The course website was also used to make key readings, presentations and other teaching material available electronically to participants over the three years of the course.

During the first distance mentoring period, participants carried out a survey of 20-30 photographs from an institution, private or teaching collection, and assignments led participants through the process of surveying, writing a condition report and developing a thorough preservation plan. The assignments of the second distance mentoring module continued to address the theme of survey (expanded in scale to larger collections and in scope to include storage and exhibition spaces, institutional policy, etc.).

Photograph conservation terminology and vocabulary (a topic from the second summer school) was also addressed through a collaborative assignment that asked participants to contribute to the creation of a twelve language, 150 term comparative vocabulary of photographic terms.

The distance mentoring assignments, curriculum and course activities are described in considerable detail on the “teaching and learning resources” web page of the GCI website: http://www.getty.edu/conservation/publications_resources/teaching/photographic_materials.html. This web page includes “session outlines” (descriptions of individual teaching sessions), technical notes, and other material that describe what was taught, and how instructors taught it.

The Fundamentals course, along with the GCI’s other project work on the preservation of photographs and photograph collections (a new initiative entitled the Middle East Photograph Preservation Initiative (MEPPI), which also uses a model of extended learning, just began in 2011) is described on the GCI website at: http://www.getty.edu/conservation/our_projects/education/cons_photo/index.html.



Extending the Learning Process - Benefits and Challenges

Curriculum

A major challenge to framing this course as an ongoing learning experience was keeping the curriculum coherent and consistent over three years. Despite a logical program (thanks to input from many in the photo conservation community), and much built-in flexibility, the curriculum that was implemented departed considerably from the ideal version drafted at the outset. This was due in large part to serious budgetary restraints that were imposed as a result of the financial crisis, as well as to unexpected issues with instructor availability.

Although all of the topics were eventually covered, some had to be postponed or restructured, and some subjects intended for the first summer school, such as fundraising and fundamentals of macro- and microclimates, did not occur until the third. This affected the “flow” of the curriculum and in some cases, the learning experience. There were also practical effects – for example, the fundraising session that was taught during the third summer school was outstanding – but would have been of greater benefit at the beginning of the course as originally intended.

In retrospect, the response to the need for changes relied perhaps too much on the considerable flexibility built into the program which allowed us to react, at the expense of a more formal re-evaluation. A strong back-up plan or a thorough evaluation with the advice of an advisory committee would have helped to reformulate the curriculum more effectively.

Another challenge, recognized from the outset, was presented by the variety of backgrounds represented in the group. As the course was focused on fundamentals, an in-depth treatment of conservation treatment was outside its scope. This message – and the GCI’s plans for future “advanced level” courses to deal with conservation treatment topics - was made clear from the outset – but it still proved difficult at times to manage expectations, and a number of conservators in the group continued to request supervised treatment time as a part of the course. This was not viable, but other opportunities were made for conservators in the group to talk about conservation problems through consultation with instructors and through group discussions where these would benefit the larger group.

These needs are very real, and the GCI does intend to initiate several advanced level courses in the region to address them more fully beginning in 2013. In terms of bringing a variety of perspectives and concerns into the classroom, the mix of backgrounds was beneficial.

Distance Mentoring

The idea of distance mentoring is used in a variety of ways in courses and activities run by the GCI Education

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department, when it can bring benefit to a group of learners. An important potential benefit is the opportunity to apply knowledge, with expert guidance, in one's own work environment. If the exercises are appropriate and the quality of the mentorship good, these experiences can serve to reinforce knowledge and build confidence and decision making skills. The distance mentoring part of the course also represents an opportunity for ongoing dialogue with peers and instructors which may widen the participant's view of the field.

Since the GCI Education department uses similar programs of distance learning activities in other courses, we were lucky to have experience and a number of other examples (some successful, others less so – these even more useful) to rely on. Participants in the Fundamentals of the Conservation of Photographs course were committed to the distance mentoring program (they and their supervisors or directors were asked to review and commit to this program in advance) and as a result it worked very well, and gave a strong sense of momentum to the three year course.

Ensuring quality participation in distance learning activities can be a challenge and requires careful crafting of a program that is realistic and useful for the group of learners. It is important to consider language and technology issues and the professional/institutional context of participants, including workload factors; accessibility of the resources and collections necessary to carry out the assignments; and the willingness of senior staff and supervisors to support the proposed work.

On the other side of the equation, the quality of the feedback from the course mentors is crucial as well. It is important for the responses of mentors to be thoughtful, encouraging and coordinated (though not necessarily standardized) to ensure that questions are being answered clearly and appropriately – and that opportunities to help participants to find answers themselves are not missed.

An assessment of the possibilities for a distance learning program should be thorough and open to different ways of structuring work and communicating – and also willing to recognize that a program of distance learning simply may not be appropriate in some contexts – for example if institutional commitment to provide time and access to material needed to complete the program is not forthcoming. Failure at a program of mentoring is discouraging and may prove much more detrimental than not having undertaken one at all.

Professional Networks

Maintaining momentum with this group over the course of three years contributed enormously to the objective of building professional networks in the region, which are crucial to continuing to move the field of photograph conservation forward. Ongoing opportunities for dialogue and shared activities had a positive impact on the quality of relationships that were formed.

By the second summer school, the dynamic had evolved from formal and somewhat strained at times (due in some part to regional politics and recent conflicts) to a far more congenial atmosphere. Cooperation began to cross national boundaries and take place in the classroom and outside it as well.

By the third year of the course, we were surprised at the number of real collaborations taking place, ranging from joint outreach and training activities (lectures, workshops and publications, etc.) to a significant international grant proposal. This latter example was a joint proposal by participants from five countries to the European Commission for funding through the Culture 2007 – 2013 grant scheme. After some growing pains, and with the benefit of the session on fundraising during the last year of the course, participants from three countries were successful in securing funds for a joint proposal.

The distance mentoring program was the framework for communication during the time between summer schools. The formation of relationships and networks is always unpredictable, and it is ultimately pointless to try too hard to force informal communication via a course website. For the Fundamentals course, leading by example – encouraging course mentors to use the website for important announcements and to make use of the discussion forum to address questions - proved to be an effective strategy to encourage shared communication. Another was to ensure that the course website was functional and straightforward – a place to access important readings and information (some of it social) and to post easily and discuss relevant questions.

The fact that informal communication is occurring and ongoing, and is supported by the course is far more important than the quantity or frequency of informal communication as officially tracked by a course web site. In fact, the hope is always that communication eventually moves away from course structures to happen more effectively in other ways. We asked participants to keep us informed about instances of cooperation, collaboration and dissemination that they were engaged in but we heard little in the first year of the course and initially assumed that not much was happening on this front.

As we had the chance to discuss this with participants during the summer schools, we were surprised to discover the amount of communication and activity that was going on. It was a challenge for us to get participants to recognize the value in some of their activities that they considered mundane or modest and assumed we would not be interested in. We struggled to get the point across that it is exactly these kinds of activities - advice shared and visits organized between participants, joint activities carried out - even small in scale, that do the work of building a profession and building support for that profession.

As the course progressed, we continued to be surprised at

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the amount and scale of communication and collaboration that was going on over the three years of course. Particularly fun examples included instances where participants took the knowledge (and in some cases, left over supplies) from process recreation sessions taught during the summer schools and created their own workshops for colleagues at their own and other institutions, and even for the public, as participants from Poland did at a national science fair for children.

Even more exciting were instances where participants from different institutions and countries collaborated on activities in order to pool resources and expertise. It is gratifying to see trainees begin to fill needs for each other and for others in the field.

Conclusion

The course Fundamentals of the Conservation of Photographs was an effort by the GCI, working with partners in Slovakia and with the help of many in the photograph conservation community, to meet the needs of an emerging group of conservation professionals within a region with a wealth of photographic collections, but with urgent preservation challenges, limited resources and very few opportunities for training. The model of a multi-year course that includes distance mentoring activities and sustained access to teaching materials, instructors and peers worked well for

this audience. The GCI plans to continue to contribute to the momentum in the region through future activities such as a regional symposium, and a series of workshops dealing with more advanced topics in photograph conservation.

It is very encouraging to see the recent developments in the region. Formal academic programs in photograph conservation are being discussed and established. The Academy of Fine Arts and Design (AFAD) in Bratislava, a project partner, created an MA specialization in photograph conservation in 2006, and others in the Czech Republic are following. In addition, several participants in the Fundamentals course who work in academic settings are working to establish the same at their own institutions.

Outside the region, the North East Document Conservation Center (NEDCC) – an early leader in promoting conservation of photographs in this region - has found funding for several years in a row to host interns from the region, and the timing for these internship opportunities could not be better.

A separate paper could be devoted to the course participants and their work, and any success is due in large part to their hard work. We would also like to acknowledge the goodwill and extraordinary dynamism of the photograph conservation community, particularly those who contributed generously to the course as instructors or advisors.

