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Shaking Up the Archive

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Abstract

From beginning to end, the process of creating a digital exhibit involves much more than what is experienced in the final product. The work that goes on between group members is often overlooked but is sometimes the most important outcome of a project for those who were a part of it. This paper documents *Shaking up the Archive* presented at the Forum for Information Professionals, which aimed to illuminate this hidden aspect and outcome of the creation of the exhibit: *Fight, Fight, Fight! Anti-authoritarianism in second-wave feminist movements in Edmonton, Alberta* as reflected in artifacts from the Karen Rowswell collection at the City of Edmonton Archives. We found that besides the exhibit itself, the results of this project were also found in the processes that we designed and employed, including formal methodologies such as Kanban Agile and approaches like intersectional feminism and values-based inquiry informed our activities. The digital exhibit can be viewed here: https://omekaprojects.artsrn.ualberta.ca/coea_ms-1210karenrowswell/s/FeminismAndAuthority/page/exploretheexhibit

Keywords: 1960-1980, anti-authoritarianism, archive, Edmonton, exhibit, feminism, intervention, process

The creation of a digital exhibit ends in a final product, but there are many more outcomes than what can be seen by simply experiencing the exhibit. The work that goes on between group members and their partners is often overlooked, but is sometimes the most important outcome of a project for those who were a part of it. The project that resulted in the exhibit: *Fight, Fight, Fight! Anti-authoritarianism in second-wave feminist movements in Edmonton, Alberta* was undertaken by three students for the course GSJ (Gender and Social Justice) 598/DH (Digital Humanities) 530 taught by Professor Deb Verhoeven. We found that besides the exhibit itself, the results of this project were found in the processes, decisions and discussions that our team tackled behind the scenes while building the exhibit.

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The Approach

Before our team could get into designing a process, we started by defining our values as suggested. We looked to Jenna Ashton's feminist ideas (2017) to build our own values. The values set a collaborative and collective tone as well as satisfied the course aim to infuse the idea of values-based work (see Figure 1). Our team wanted to be intentional in all our decisions and implement feminist approaches as much as possible in our archival interpretation, by keeping our values at the forefront of our minds. During the process, we deliberately returned to the values to ensure that we were adhering to them and their spirit. This work is largely invisible to the end viewer, but the fingerprints are all over the exhibit and part of the very fabric of each decision.

Figure 1: ***Values***

Positionality was an important part of this project because our team followed Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectional feminist approach (TED, 2016). It was essential that we were up front about our positionality for this intervention. We approached the project with good intentions, but we needed to be transparent about our personal lenses. For

our project, we created a common position description in the spirit of the Chicago Women's Graphics Collective. We wanted to reject the cult of the individual by creating and presenting as a committee. In part, our statement reads:

> "*We are, white, cisgender, middle-class women, and our pronouns are she/her. We are settlers living in Metis districts 3, 4, and 10 on Treaty 6, 7 and 8 territory. We are privileged in our education and family background, and acknowledge that those privileges have and continue to shape our lives*."

We wanted to activate the archival material with an intersectional foundation, making sure to think about the material in a multi-dimensional way. We also needed to make sure that our process adhered to this philosophy. We approached the material with a sense of curiosity and discovery and our process needed to match.

We decided on a flexible, iterative approach. It facilitated exploring the content but it also solved some logistical challenges. We had a distributed group, spread-out all-over Canada from Alberta to the Maritimes. It was difficult to have synchronous face-to-face meetings. Incorporating an agile workflow meant that we had a method to collaborate, work collectively, keep organized and communicate, but not require us to be co-located or synchronous.

We opted to capitalize on the provided software to use a Kanban agile approach. Kanban is an established agile methodology where work is visualized on a board allowing the entire team to see the state of every piece of work at any time (Tarne, 2011). We kept track of anything that needed to be done, adding as the project progressed. Our board was simple and straightforward. We kept anything that needed to be done in the "to do" or "backlog" column, then we could move the cards from "doing" to "done" column as they were completed. Since we didn't have a separate column for review, we'd add another task for that for items that needed a review. Some cards were individual tasks, and others were group tasks.

We used Trello for both project management and as a content holder in order to keep a single repository for our process (see Figure 2). We ended up with three content

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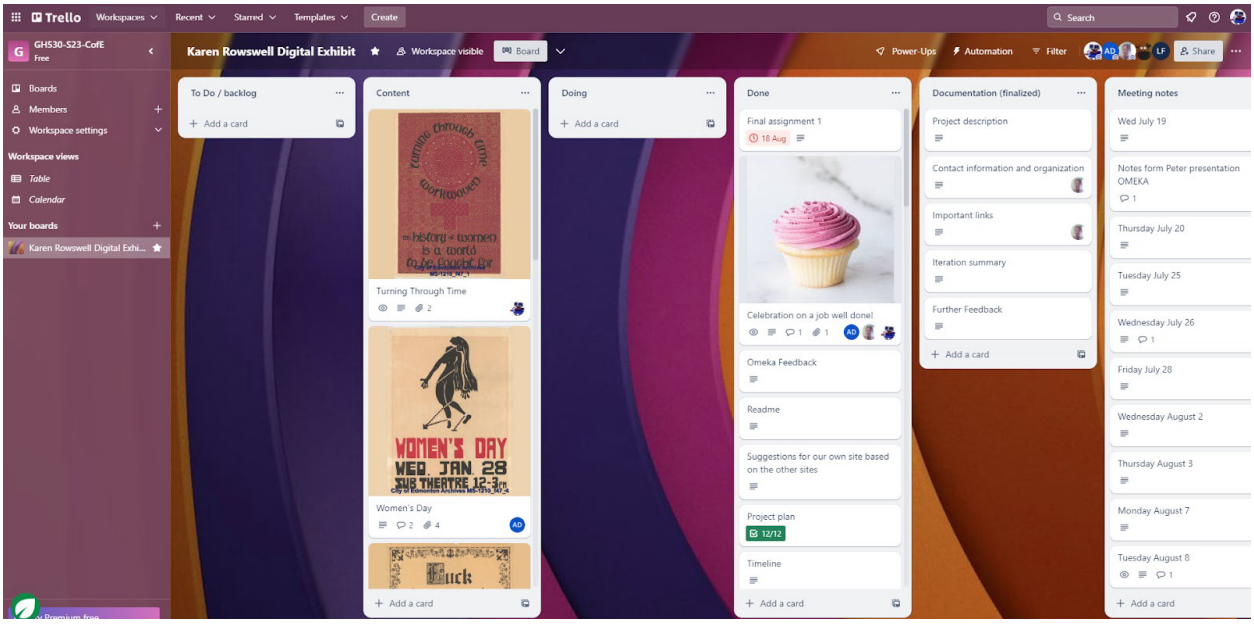
columns alongside our action columns. One with the six main pieces of content, one for our finalized documentation and another for meeting notes. Our use of cards for content and documentation is atypical of the formal Kanban methodology. As is assumed with agile, it was our individual responsibility to take cards and work on them. Each card was owned by one of the group members. We did have a few times after progress meetings where we would take a few cards, but generally each person had content cards and just one task card at a time.

Figure 2: Trello screenshot



We used an iterative and integrated strategy for the information and structural design. Our team worked on these designs in tandem, allowing the two processes of site information design and site structure feed each other. The site structure emerged as the content coalesced. As we made changes to the information design it modified the site structure. As we uncovered the design language of Omeka (the web publishing platform used for this project), we tweaked the content to fit. This interwoven, iterative design meant that we did not delay at any point waiting for decisions to be made. For instance, there were some limitations to how Omeka allowed us to link, so that changed some of the materials we selected. The process was quite nimble, and we tried not to

get too rigid about any one piece as we arranged things. Both the form and the content of the exhibit emerged from this process.

The Content

Using the limited collection prepared by the archivists at the City of Edmonton Archives, six visually appealing items were chosen to highlight, and ended up being the scaffolding that held up the rest of the exhibit (see Figure 3 for the works). We then explored other archives (traditional and non-traditional) to find contextual material. Next, we re-inspected the Karen Rowswell Collection and the secondary material in order to identify where feminist and other marginalized voices were underrepresented. Our goal was to create an exhibit that added context to the selected items and helped position them within the broader story. If deemed possible, we sought to fill in the gaps. This exhibit represents just a small slice of the activities in Edmonton at the time.

Karen Rowswell was a compelling source of information about feminist movements in Edmonton in the 1960s-1970s, as she was highly involved in University of Alberta and community events (City of Edmonton Archives, 2022). She also kept ephemeral materials that are sometimes difficult to access through traditional information sources, making her materials a great starting point for research. There were three levels of curation: the items that Karen Rowswell collected, the items chosen by the City of Edmonton Archives, and the items curated from those two collections. The content and site structure were developed in concert, meaning that each decision we made affected the entire project.

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Figure 3: Screenshot of the six final works selected

Because we implemented an intersectional lens, we wanted to make sure that we searched for any voices that might not have been represented in the Karen Rowswell fonds. We did this through our research on contextual information found outside of the original collection. These materials highlighted voices other than white women's, including the Gay and Lesbian Archive (GALA) fonds (City of Edmonton Archives, n.d.) and the larger Black women's movement happening at the time. Through the process of selection and researching contextual information, we synthesized the materials into a cohesive theme.

The Exhibit

The result was an exhibition about anti-authoritarianism in second-wave feminist movements in Edmonton, Alberta, as reflected in artifacts from the Karen Rowswell collection at the City of Edmonton Archives. Although specific in scope, but it does

provide context and a perspective to what feminist activists were engaging with at the time.

There were many considerations when creating the digital exhibit, including design choices such as discoverability, maneuverability, and the order in which the information was to be presented. We decided on starting with our land acknowledgement and content warning in order to prepare viewers, and then presenting the six main items that shaped the exhibit. Viewers could choose any of the items to start with, resulting in incorporated links that people could follow throughout based on interest. We ended with a page dedicated to other voices that we unearthed, but they were also incorporated into the other pages where appropriate (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Other voices

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Conclusion

Through the process of creating a digital exhibit, we have engaged a feminist approach by valuing the process as much as the product. Often the attention is on the final product, but for us, designing and implementing the process, something that is invisible to the final viewer, was just as important. Two facets of the process, the many levels of curation and the external sources, add a richer historical context to the archival materials. While the final exhibit was an important outcome, the processes we used to construct the site, the activities and learning we engaged in were just as important as the exhibit itself. The final exhibit is a testament to feminism in Edmonton in the 1960s-80s, but the process is a continuation of feminism through our practice.

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