



Disaster response integrated into the conservation syllabus at the Haute Ecole Arc Conservation-Restauration (HE-Arc CR) - University of Applied Sciences and Arts Western Switzerland (HES-SO)

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1. Trigger for the disaster response module at HE-Arc CR

In 2005 large areas of Eastern Switzerland suffered flooding after long and severe rainfalls. Several museums were affected and while all rescue work was successful, a potential for improvement was noted. Following these events the Haute Ecole Arc Conservation-Restauration (HE-Arc CR), objects conservation department of the Swiss Conservation-Restoration Campus, introduced a practical three weeks module „disaster response for cultural heritage“ in 2008. This course has developed into a sound, didactically structured and exciting experience for all partners involved: students, teachers, civil service agents, fire fighters and museum curators.



Fig. 1: Flood in the area of Sarnen, Switzerland, 2005.
©Swiss Air Force 2005.



Fig. 2: Students prepare the collection for the move to a temporary storage facility. ©HE-Arc CR 2015

2. Methodology: Role play

The founding principle of this course is role playing. The students are welcomed by two archives and museum curators, who introduce them to “their” collection (consisting of donated or flea-market objects and documents). On the pretext that the collection needs to temporarily leave the premises for a refurbishment of the building, the students get acquainted with the differences in inventory practices for museum collections and archival holdings.

Inventory and packing of collection

Students inventory and number the collection, establish a transportation list and pack the objects.

Introduction to disaster response

The students then take a two-day introductory course on disaster response, which includes various presentations such as a photographic introduction to disasters, graphic animations regarding on-site management and the description of the Swiss Civil Security chain of command. Safety issues are presented by a teacher from the Health department, along with the demonstration of individual protection equipment. Mostly however, that part of the module is based on simulation training tech-

niques which includes group exercises on setting up an adequate organization for salvage, experimenting efficient communication techniques or reflecting on pairs of objects shown before after water or fire damage. Meanwhile, the objects have been transported to a Fire Brigade training site, in order to be either set on fire or flooded – on a two year rotation.



Fig. 3: Students team work during the theoretical session.
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Fig. 4: At the training site of the Fire Brigade. ©HE-Arc CR 2009.

Alarm and actual disaster response

As the students are the only persons beside the curators to know the collection, the firemen call them on site where they are given the responsibility to rescue, stabilize, document, re-inventory and if necessary deaccession the collection, following ICOM Guidelines.



Fig. 5: Coordination between head of disaster response (a student) and Fire Brigade.
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Fig. 6: A Civil Protection Agent preparing for the evacuation of objects from the disaster site.
©HE-Arc CR 2015



Fig. 7: Drying salvaged objects in an improvised shaded area.
©HE-Arc CR 2009



Fig. 8: Drying soaked upholstered furniture with a water vacuum cleaner. ©HE-Arc CR 2010

All procedures are implemented in permanent coordination with fire fighters, civil security representatives and the collection’s curators. The local press is involved, enhancing the real-life feeling of this highly practical training.



Fig. 9: The head of emergency response (a student) is interviewed by the local television for the evening news. ©HE-Arc CR 2013



Fig. 10: Visualizing spatial organization on the disaster site.
©HE-Arc CR 2015

Mold

After five intense days on the disaster site and rescue operations, the students follow a two days laboratory course about mold and prevention strategies.



Fig. 11: Cleaning mold on objects.
©HE-Arc CR 2009



Fig. 12: Slide from a student's presentation with statistics of object's condition after the disaster. ©HE-Arc CR 2014

Documentation and Statistics - handing over of lead back to the curator

The end of the training course is used to prepare a full documentation including a timeline, a description of the organization that prevailed, a critical review of actions taken, statistics on the salvaged collection, time spent on various operations and an estimation of the costs involved. All training partners convene for a final presentation by the students, who then hand the lead back over to the curators.

3. Conclusion – we learn a lot from each other

Having been iterated nine times, the HE-Arc CR three weeks course appears to be the only one of this scope in European schools for Conservation and is still evolving. It has proved to be a very valuable experience not only for the Conservation students, but also for the participating professionals of the Civil Protection Agency, Museum Curators, Archivists and Press. Over the years, this collaboration has lead to training blocks offered to Civil Protection Agencies and Fire Brigade agents, thus rising awareness for the protection of cultural property in case of emergency far outside the conservation field.

4. Outlook

Due to increasing interest, the HE-Arc CR is developing a two days continuing education course for practicing conservators, modeled after the training program presented here and centered on developing team skills and technical capacities to take charge of a flooded collection.