Beyond Pedagogy: Reconsidering the Public Purpose of Museums

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Beyond Pedagogy: Reconsidering the public purpose of museums explores issues standing at the intersection of public pedagogy, memory, and critical theory, focusing on the explicit and implicit educational imperative of art, natural history, and indigenous museums, cultural centers, memorial sites, heritage houses, and other cultural heritage sites that comprise the milieu of educating, learning, and knowing. Taken together, the various essays comprising this book demonstrate that a more nuanced examination of the role of cultural heritage institutions as pedagogical sites requires a critical gaze to understand the function of the authority and ways through which such institutions educate. Beyond Pedagogy also makes a vital point about the complexity of such institutions and the need to comprehend how pedagogy emerges not only as an end result of the museum’s educational purpose but also in relation to the historically defined mandates that increasingly come to question the distinction between the knowledge we know and how we come to know it. As such, this volume expands our understandings of the ways in which pedagogy operates in the contexts of museums and heritage sites and the forms of knowledge, knowing, and being it conjures, celebrates, obscures, and/or silences in the process of producing among museum visitors particular notions of identity, subjectivity and voice, ones that, more often than not, reify rather than challenge traditional conceptualizations of the nation and its past, present, and future.
Beyond Pedagogy
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Reconsidering the Public Purpose of Museums

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INTRODUCTION

The Museum as a Space of Pedagogical Ambiguity

For many, the public museum requires little explanation. As a space for a pedagogical encounter, the museum is typically considered a place where exhibitions and displays of objects serve as a valued entity for informing the public about the past, culture, art, and nature. As a socially valued institution, its historically defined pedagogical purpose is actively questioned by a range of intellectually challenging scholarship and practice within and beyond the physical museum space. Just as the public museum, with its focus on collections, exhibitions, and research, is actively engaged with pedagogy, so are the discourses of education that increasingly incorporate the museum as a learning site. The convergence of this intellectual exchange outlines a distinctive scholarly terrain and emerging zone of practice that is the focus of this book.

To understand the pedagogical mandate of public museums, one must understand the colonial practices that aided in their creation. It is well known that the public museum began as an ‘elite undertaking to save, record, and produce the cultural heritage of the past and the present’ (Crane, 1997, p. 44). By drawing on its introduction around the world as a result of colonialism and international relations, museums are linked through a long history of contact informed by empire building, slavery, immigration, and a multiplicity of local, national, and transnational networks and practices. In museums (and particularly those designated national, historical, ethnological, and even natural history), distance is folded into difference to demarcate the same from the other. What results is a collective of bounded knowledge that aids in the construction of an ideal of citizenship, identity, and belonging that is hierarchical and exclusionary. Often the museum sets up a ‘them’ vs ‘us’ dichotomy. What is at times ignored in this colonial coupling is the absence of a critical response that works to disrupt or trouble the dichotomy. Rather, these are often kept firmly in place and entrenched further.

Much of the above discussion concerning the museum as a colonial project speaks to the museum’s pedagogical nature and the ways in which pedagogy has been used to establish the museum as a place of learning and in inviting visitors to assume particular assumptions, perspectives, and views about the world and its people—who counts and how, what direction we should desire, what values we ought to assume and live by, etc. Positioning the public to know in particular ways is an unavoidable pedagogical stance. While the term “pedagogy” is most
often equated with what teachers do in classrooms, more recent understandings of pedagogy, emanating from critical pedagogy and cultural studies, defines pedagogy in much broader terms. Pedagogy is not only considered more than what happens in schools but also, and importantly, as any process “through which we are encouraged to know, to form a particular way of ordering the world, giving and making sense of it” (Simon, 1992, p. 56). Regardless of whether it takes place in schools or in museums, the practice of pedagogy, according to Simon’s perspective, is an attempt to influence experience and subjectivity. Broadly conceived, then, pedagogy would be inherent in any message, contained in any form of action, structure, or text, inside or outside of schools, that organizes someone’s experiences. Influencing the ways in which meanings are absorbed, understood, accepted as well as challenged, distorted or dismissed (Simon, 1992, p. 59), pedagogy, “organizes a view of, and specifies particular versions of what knowledge is of most worth, in what direction we should desire, what it means to know something, and how we might construct representations of ourselves, others, and the world” (Giroux & Simon, 1988, p. 12).

Museum curators, to borrow from McWilliam and Taylor (1996), curate “out of a desire to teach, to tell, to relate something to some body” (p. vii). Any curatorial decision “to show this rather than that, to show this in relationship to that, to say this about that” is, according to Hall (1997) a choice about what knowledge is positioned as important. It is through the language and textual devices offered by the museum, as well as through the museum’s spatial organization, objects, textures, and lighting, and the degree to which they are combined that visitors come to know, negotiate meaning and identity, and explore the world presented to them. Exploring pedagogy in the context of museums opens the possibility of examining not only how people and issues are represented in museum exhibits but also how audiences are constructed and constituted as they are invited, pedagogically, to feel, value and learn about the world in certain ways. Providing visitors a selectively constructed social, cultural, and political imagery and establishing a position from which they are invited to perceive the world, museums act pedagogically by generating forms of discursive, moral, and social regulation that constitute and regulate the limits of possible consciousness and modalities of self (Bernstein, 1996; Cherryholmes, 1988; Scholes, 1985).

To suggest the need to explore pedagogy as it is situated in public museums is to suggest an ambiguity of the educational imperative currently held by museums. The pedagogical ambiguity of public museums refers to the rapidly growing interaction between educators and museums and the differing conceptions about the educational role museums serve. As the educational relevance of museums become more prevalent, new concerns require a critical self-reflection of the pedagogical work museums hold to advance. Although public museums have long been aware of their vested educational authority, there remains a general tendency to consider them as sites that diffuse specific knowledge to the public, or, in an extremely limited conception as sites, where field trips hold a transient short-term educational function. Furthermore, while within the field of museum studies there is wide recognition of
how the museum’s educational role serves an unquestioned intent so certain does their purpose seem to be, there is a general lack of agreement about how best to consider the extent to which museums are implicated in knowledge creation. For over the last 30 years, an extensive literature within museum studies has offered comment on what has been referred to as the “second museum age” (Phillips, 2005). Even with this growing awareness and acknowledgement that education serves a major focus as the new museology, how museums consider their relationship with the public to advance their educational imperative remains diverse.

As a site where knowledge and learning converge, new educational issues are being suggested particular to museums that require a cross disciplinary perspective. From such a common concern, multiple intellectual arguments have resulted. It is obvious in the increased public comment on the role of public museums as public intellectual sites; or when museums create balkanized lesson plans to justify their educational intent; or when educators turn to museums for evidence of and proximity to the past or cultural groups. In this book we capture some of the excitement breaking out across the intellectual landscape of public pedagogy. We try to move the diversity of the contributions toward a more collaborative and creative awareness that explores the meaning of learning in and through museums and cultural heritage sites.

Efforts to introduce a critical sensibility about the pedagogical purpose served by museums often dwell on the objects displayed within the physical spaces. By emphatically denying the dependence only on the objects, we call attention to the contextual institutional elements offered by museums and cultural heritage centers as supporting (or in some cases, limiting) knowledge construction. Such is our strategy. Our goal is to present case studies to highlight those museums that make us pause to consider what exactly do we gain from attending, while bringing them into the conversation about learning and education, and to illuminate the educational opportunities revealed. We also understand our responsibility to demonstrate something of the utility of the newer educational territory.

Hence, this collection might be properly regarded as a beginning. In it, educators, historians, and museum scholars provide a common ground when explaining the production of knowledge in museum spaces. They also uncover new and insightful ways of thinking that advance our understandings of the relationship museums hold to defining knowledge.

THE STRUCTURE AND ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

If one considers, as we do, museum curators as pedagogical workers who assemble particular artifacts to be displayed in certain ways as a mechanism through which to teach, and that every decision curators make as to whether to show this rather than that and show that “this” in specific places—next to “that” or adjacent to another “this” or “that”—have implications for the kind of knowledge and knowing museum visitors might be able to construct (or ignore), we cannot but see our own role as editors of this volume as curators of some sort. After all, editors of a volume, just
like museum curators, are in the business of selecting specific artifacts (in this case, chapters) and organizing and assembling them in a particular sequence, ordering the reader’s journey to encounter the substance of this book. And just like any decision made by a museum curator, the decisions we make here as to which chapter to begin and end with, how to group (or not group) certain chapters, conveys particular messages and acts pedagogically to position readers to think in some ways about some things and not about others, to make certain connections and avoid others.

A collection of essays as rich and varied as the ones in this volume presents us with an organizational challenge, for there are invariably multiple logics that run through the essays and put them into dialogue with each other. Conceiving of this book as a “museum” of some sort, we could have organized the chapters in various ways, with each of those decisions providing a different experience for readers. After much deliberation, we decided to organize the essays by their topical relationship to each other.

The first two essays explore the current challenges to curatorial authority. Those working in museums and other cultural heritage institutions are being forced to question their practices in the wake of increasing public demands for a collaborative and responsive relationship. Both Margaret Lindauer and Christine Baron offer chapters showing how challenges to curatorial authority impact pedagogy in significant ways. Lindauer outlines the research, development, and execution completed by student-curators in an exhibition and how they sought to highlight and then refigure and share their own new found, but temporary, curatorial authority. The resulting pedagogy of shared authority seeks to engage the public (as well as the student-curators) in thinking and utilizing the museum as a site for learning directed by each individual. While Lindauer’s essay focus on student curators in an art gallery, the second essay by Christine Baron highlights the value historical houses hold in supporting historical understanding. Baron provides, in a way, a model to consider and interpret the pedagogical purposes of historical houses. She argues the need for an ongoing and sustaining relationship between those working in historical houses and the university faculty who teaches undergraduate students. Arguing for a sustained relationship and an ongoing engagement will allow, she suggests, students to understand the complexity of the contextualization of the past provided by the historical house.

Following from the two essays examining curatorial authority are three essays focused specifically on the dimensions and visual politics of displays involving indigenous objects and representation. Museums have been forced to question their epistemologies and practices in the wake of decolonization and the more visible, urgent, and vocal ways indigenous groups have questioned the authority of the museum. Certainly, the current claims for repatriation of objects and their highly publicized returns to indigenous groups have challenged the public museum’s rights of ownership. This move has raised concerns about how their objects have remained housed, classified, and exhibited and what interpretive structures continue to be utilized in an attempt to re-present indigenous history, culture, and art. Mallory
Richard’s examination of the newly renamed Canadian Museum of Civilization (CMC), now the Canadian Museum of History, is an appropriate starting point in setting the historical groundwork of tensions between public museums in Canada and its First Nations people. Richard offers a nuanced reading of the museum’s central exhibit in the Canada Hall. She draws from the historical significance of fur trading as a trope within Canadian history. Yet she highlights how the exhibit decouples the relationship between fur trading and indigenous identity. She notes in an ironic way that the separation of indigenous history to a separate exhibit in the CMC moves it from the center of a national narrative to the margins. She notes the political struggles in recognizing indigenous perspectives as the museum offers a celebratory vision of a national past.

While Richard’s essay focuses on a Canadian example, Avner Segall and Brenda Trofanenko’s essay examines the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI). Segall and Trofanenko consider the pedagogical purposes of three permanent exhibitions to identify who the museum chooses to inform and what the main message the museum seeks to present. They distinguish the museum practices implemented by indigenous community curators to speak in their own voices about personal issues, and to promote the idea of multiple voices rather than a single, authoritative and unified narration. In their attempt to reverse the long held anthropological gaze by attempting to engage the non-Native visitor in issues specific to identity, the museum has engaged practices that go against the traditional museum grain. Attempting such practices, however, does have consequences specific to how and what the museum teaches its visitors. The authors note the difficulty of the non-native visitor to attend the museum if not interested in the presented historical narratives of contact, the traditional philosophies and indigenous epistemologies. They argue that, for the NMAI to be pedagogically relevant, educators need to consider it as a lesson or a vehicle to understand why such exhibits are curated, and why it has received both praise and critique drawing on the expectations of both indigenous and non-indigenous publics.

The third essay in this group examines the scholarly voice surrounding a native-run museum/interpretive center. Jonathan Clapperton provides a narrative of how the successes and conflicts of the Xa:ytem Longhouse Interpretive Center (XLIC) in Mission, British Columbia mirrors in many respects the experiences of non-Native museums. The XLIC staff, many who are not from the Stó:lō Nation, have had to confront opposition to certain practices from their principle audience within the Stó:lō community. This opposition is due largely to the center being developed as both a ‘tribal’ and ‘majority’ museum. At one and the same time, the Center works to protect the archaeological importance of the site. The designation of the Longhouse and the archeological site as a National Historic Site demonstrated the growing importance of preservation allowed for expansion. For Clapperton, the expansion has to be understood within the context of contemporary debates about the fine line between local preservation and global sustainability for cultural heritage institutions.
Throughout this book, authors question the pedagogical purposes served by museums and cultural heritage institutions in defining how disciplines are constructed and knowledge is mobilized. Following from this, three authors foreground the difficulty the public may experience in attending those institutions dealing with uneasy past events. In his essay, Jim Garrett raises questions of how best to utilize a Holocaust museum as a learning site, realizing that these often-utilized field trip experiences pose pedagogical challenges. Although Garrett does not speak directly to their limitations, he extends the provisional engagement of a museum experience particularly within Holocaust museums. In presenting student teacher responses to Holocaust museum visits, Garrett suggests a long lasting association will occur beyond the physical space of the exhibit. He suggests there is no such thing as a singular encounter but, rather, the possibility of an individual experiencing an on-going response. He argues the need for confusion to be acknowledged and for individuals to realize their response will continue over time.

Garrett’s nod to the uneasiness of a museum experience is highlighted by Simone Schweber but from a more personal event. In her chapter, she offers up a personal encounter of her experiences in a Holocaust museum. For most, such an encounter – to spend a semester doing research within such a haloed institution – is enviable. But in Schweber’s case, her role as an insider prompts questions about what she takes with her when she leaves after an extended time in such an emotionally charged institution. While Garrett’s and Schweber’s essays both look at the fragility of personal experiences, museum director Julia Rose, in her essay “Commemorative Museum Pedagogy,” discusses an approach to museum education that seeks to understand what is at stake for visitors who engage in learning about past events deemed difficult. In explaining what she has called commemorative museum pedagogy, she suggests the need for educators to recognize the tension each visitor faces as being an individual learner and a member of multiple communities.

The changing political landscapes around the world have resulted in parallel changes to national museums. Sandra Schmidt highlights the challenges four museums faced in South Africa during a time when the nation itself was redefining and establishing its national identity. As the museums worked to serve as unifying institutions, the creation of narratives of democracy, unity, and human rights became a consistent trope. But this did not result in an increase in audience attendance. Schmidt argues the need for museums, if holding a national pedagogy, to identify and adopt a narrative the general public can support.

In the final paper in this collection, Bill Gaudelli writes of how a group of graduate students enrolled in a teacher education program considered the National Museum as a pedagogical space. The comments and conversations offered up by the students highlight a sense of confusion about what the student expected to experience with the actual embodied opportunities offered as well as witnessing the confusion that others may experience. The significant argument is the unacceptable agreement of singular and impersonal experiences attended by those who consider any museum as a pedagogical space.
We conclude this edited collection with a summary of the arguments and suggestions of how best to consider the productive tension any museum serves in advancing its pedagogical agenda. While the physical structures of any museum will impact an individual’s experience, the changing dynamics of a museum will render a lone pedagogical purpose unachievable. What, then, does this mean for educators who are increasingly turning to the museum as a source for knowledge creation? This book serves as a starting point to consider the myriad ways in which such institutions continue a pedagogical imperative.

NOTE

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REFERENCES


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INTRODUCTION

Ascending the staircase to the second floor of the Anderson Gallery at Virginia Commonwealth University School of the Arts (VCUarts) in June 2006, a visitor would have encountered the title of a collaboratively curated exhibition, *From the Seat of Authority*, appearing in lime-green vinyl lettering and deliberately placed slightly askew on a charcoal gray wall. To the right of the title, a doorway led into a relatively small gallery (approximately ninety square-feet), which also was painted dark gray, and remained nearly empty. In the center of the room, a narrow white pedestal stood curiously void of artwork. The small black vinyl text on the top horizontal surface of the pedestal offered the simple directive “place object here.” Some visitors took this instruction literally and dug into their pockets, retrieving a ticket stub, gum wrapper or expired i.d. card and placed it on the pedestal. While the curators (students in the graduate museum studies program) had not anticipated the accumulation of reverse-souvenirs (objects left behind rather than acquired as a token of experience), such visitor response was befitting of the curatorial objectives for the exhibition, in that visitors assumed some agency in response to exhibition text.

In this paper, I characterize *From the Seat of Authority* and a subsequent student-curated exhibition as examples of what Sharon Macdonald (2006) calls “second-wave new museology.” Second-wave new museology implicitly refers to “old museology” and to “new museology.” Both terms were coined by Peter Vergo (1989), who asserted that old museology was “too much about museum methods, and too little about the purpose of museums” (p. 3). Conversely new museology has investigated the political, ideological and sociological implications of normative museum practices, past and present. While old museology taught pre-professionals how to carry out standards of practice for presenting “fact, objectivity, superior taste, and authoritative knowledge” (Macdonald, 2006, p. 4), new museology focused on deconstructing museum programs and policies to discern the particular contexts in which “certain kinds of knowledge [especially those deemed ‘objective’ or ‘true’] reigned and others were marginalized or ignored” (Macdonald, 2006, p. 3).

Second-wave new museology looks to merge the old and the new—investigating strategies for developing exhibitions, programs and policies that respond to late-
twentieth-century, academic and theoretical critiques of normative museum practices. I have taken Macdonald’s call for such endeavors as an education imperative for contemporary pre-professionals. Engaging in such projects ideally instills the necessary standards of practice that museum professionals are expected to enact, while also challenging students to present theory-based (as opposed to object-based) knowledge. Steven Conn (1998) historically situates the relationship of object-based epistemology to museums. He explains, “[O]bjects . . . were seen by late Victorians as the sites of meaning and knowledge, wherein new knowledge about the world could be created and given order” (p. 15). Furthermore “museums, not universities, were seen as places where the work of producing that knowledge would take place,” because “they fostered original research through the careful and systematic way they dealt with objects” (p. 16). As the nineteenth century drew to a close, production of new knowledge had been moving away from collecting and empirically analyzing objects, while being overshadowed by studies that focused on the interrelationship of objects, ideas, systems, societies, etc. Universities became the primary site of knowledge production, and museums became venues for disseminating already established knowledge. Generally speaking, the knowledge presented in museums was exclusively object-based until the late-twentieth century when thematic and/or idea-based approaches were initiated (see, for example, Karp and Levine, 1991, and Meijers, 1996). This noteworthy shift, while occurring in museums several decades later than in universities, sustained the already-established relationship between museums and universities, with the former disseminating knowledge produced in the latter.

New museology coincided with critiques of other academic disciplines that applied theoretical knowledge (e.g., poststructuralism, postmodernism, postcolonialism, feminism, semiotics, queer theory, etc.) and deconstructed modernist, masculinist and/or Euro-American histories and research practices. As described below, student-curators referred to new museological (and related) publications as they conceptualized their exhibitions and made practical decisions about labels, checklist, exhibition layout and design. Furthermore, insofar as museological analyses represent knowledge produced in colleges and universities but not yet widely disseminated in museums, ignoring the theories associated with new museology would represent a lapse in the post-Victorian function of museums that Conn described. Thus at the same time that I assert the educational imperative of student-curated exhibitions that address new museological critiques, I argue that museums owe it to their visitors to include theoretically-based exhibitions in their programming. The overarching purpose of the paper is therefore to delineate the relationship between old museology and new museology enacted in two distinct examples of student-curated exhibitions that reflected theoretically grounded academic developments of the late-twentieth century. The two student-curated exhibitions (and the contexts of their conceptualization and design) are offered as examples, not as a prescriptive “how-to” that can be readily transferred from one project to the next. Indeed, insofar as late-twentieth century social, literary, and critical theories collectively offer a broad
AFTER THE CRITIQUES

range of perspectives on the world, the potential scope for such exhibitions is vast, and the particular qualities of exhibitions will vary according to the theory being engaged, the collections being displayed and the context in which the exhibition is installed. I hope these examples will inspire other museums and museum studies programs to enact second-wave new museology; therefore I conclude the paper with reflective remarks, drawn partly from students’ peer reviews, about the pedagogical challenges associated with facilitating collaborative projects.

THE VCUARTS CONTEXT

Shortly after I began teaching at VCUarts, I approached the Assistant Director of Anderson Gallery to request a biennial slot in the exhibition calendar for student-curated exhibitions (which would be a new endeavor for the gallery). She graciously (and courageously) reserved the second floor of the gallery for eight weeks during the summer. She also offered staff support and allocated adequate funding, despite the fact that I could not describe what these exhibitions would be about, what they would look like or what they would display. Fortunately, she implicitly endorsed the constructivist learning theory that I enacted—allowing students not only to learn by doing but also to generate new knowledge from their experiences.

It goes without saying that securing an exhibition space was a crucial first step toward offering students exhibit development opportunities. However, the facility and collection of Anderson Gallery has also posed specific challenges and limitations to the students’ endeavors. Navigation through these challenges corresponds to the “how to” of old museology. The gallery resides in a humble building that housed the school library from the mid-1940s until 1970, when it was turned over to the School of the Arts to be used as a gallery. Limited renovations or upgrades to the four-story building have been completed since 1970. For example, the building lacks an elevator, museum-quality climate control or sophisticated security system, all of which limit the kinds of works that other institutions might loan for exhibitions. Loan opportunities are also limited by the production and installation schedule for the exhibitions. Students conceptualized, developed and designed exhibits during the spring semesters; installation began approximately two weeks after the end of the semester. This is a remarkably short period of time—precluding loans of works from institutions whose policies require that requests be submitted more than three months in advance of a loan period.

Each of the student-curated exhibitions therefore relied heavily (though not exclusively) upon the gallery’s relatively small, permanent collection—an eclectic mix of artworks, primarily including works on paper (prints, drawings and photographs) from various periods though concentrated in the mid- to late-twentieth century. Artworks by student alumni, former faculty members and local artists are also included, and there are selected collections of ethnographica—notably a collection of Guatemalan textiles and a travel collection of artifacts from Southeast Asia. All objects in the collection have been gifted to the gallery or to the university.
Thus the collection has been amassed in a relatively ad hoc process rather than according to an articulated collecting plan (which is not at all unusual in the histories of countless museums).

The physical layout of the second-floor exhibition space also poses specific challenges. As noted above, visitors encounter a doorway to a small (approximately 90-square foot) gallery after ascending the staircase. A rectangular gallery (approximately 650 square feet) is situated to the west of the staircase, while to the east a larger gallery (approximately 1575 square feet total) is constituted by two contiguous spaces, of nearly equal size, barely distinguished from one another with narrow walls (about 7 feet wide) extending toward one another from the sides of the gallery. Visitors traverse the galleries in various sequences—some people turn left at the top of the stairs, others enter the small gallery directly in front of them, and still others turn right. Thus the floor plan precludes exhibitions that anticipate that visitors would read or experience objects in a prescribed sequence; the narrative gist of each gallery must stand alone, while also relating to an overarching theme or idea.

Students faced challenges associated with structural limitations of the gallery at the same time that they brought little or no prior experience or concrete understanding of the deliberative and creative processes associated with curating an exhibition—articulating an exhibition theme; working with archive and museum records; assessing collection management issues; designing the installation while learning about installation techniques; writing, editing and re-writing exhibition text; working within a predetermined budget; and developing promotional materials. Students also secured loans from individual collectors, artists and galleries. At the same time that they were “learning as they went”, they also faced deadlines for production (frame and pedestal specifications) and promotional materials (news release, postcards and brochures).

The audience also posed particular challenges—as well as opportunities. Although formal demographic analysis has not been conducted, informal observation suggests that visitors to the gallery are primarily art, design and art history students and faculty at the university, as well as local artists and art collectors. Thus they already are aware of, or interested in knowing about, trends and issues related to the production, display and reception of contemporary and historic artworks. On the one hand, student-curators found this recognition to be liberating, for it meant that text panels could include such words as “venerate” “aura” and “postmodern” without having to be defined. On the other hand, they struggled with writing concise text panels that were intellectual but not pedantic, making assertions without telling visitors what to think and posing questions that were not patronizing (or “dumbed down”).

FROM THE SEAT OF AUTHORITY

The ten graduate students enrolled in the spring 2006 “Development and Analysis of Museum Exhibitions” course decided that because their collective expertise was museum studies (as opposed to, for example, a particular temporal or geographical
After the critiques

area of art history), they would set out to develop an exhibition about museum theory and practice. They were inspired by late-twentieth-century artist interventions that critiqued museum practice (see Putnam, 2001).

Initial brainstorming generated numerous possible themes and subthemes as well as a list of potentially relevant artworks from the gallery’s collection. Students wrote each thematic idea on a 4” x 6” index card and placed the cards along with color photocopies of artworks on a tabletop, arranging and re-arranging them to create various sections and sub-sections of an exhibition. Narrowing the possibilities involved lively, sometimes contentious, discussion and debate that extended over several weeks as students conducted research on potential artworks. Ultimately they identified four inter-related themes most strongly supported by available artworks and collectively contributing to a coherent exhibition—museum as shrine, museum as frame, curatorial authority, and museum collections as fragments of fragments.

Inspiration for each subtheme was rooted in new museological analyses. For example, students’ interest in the metaphor “museum as shrine” was stimulated by Janet Marstine’s “Introduction” in New Museum Theory and Practice: An Introduction (2005), where she asserts, “The paradigm of museum as shrine depends on the institution’s declaration of authority . . . [which] gives an assurance that museum objects are ‘authentic’ masterpieces that express universal truths in an established canon or standard of excellence” (p. 9). This theme inspired the previously described gallery at the top of the stairs. However the curators’ goal, throughout the exhibition, was neither to represent essayists’ arguments nor didactically to explain exhibition themes. Rather student-curators hoped that visitors would engage in thinking about selected ideas associated with new museology. Thus on the back wall of the gallery, a text panel titled “Aura of Authority” stated:

Artworks don’t speak for themselves but rather through the contexts in which they are seen. Objects displayed in art museums become enshrined in an aura of curatorial authority and a host of its associations—artistic genius, aesthetic experience, a supposed truth in history, the expertise of scholar and connoisseur, etc. The visitor is expected to contemplate, respect, even venerate, but not to challenge what s/he sees or reads.

The aforementioned empty pedestal was intended to suggest that any object placed on display in an art museum is enshrined, and the dark walls were meant to create a serene space for contemplation.

Wall colors throughout the exhibition also signified a rejection of the “white cube.” As Debora Meijers (1996) notes, “The use of white has become a traditional feature of the [art] museum” (p.16); it purports a neutral context in which to view artwork. Yet, as student-curators discussed, no context is neutral. A white cube signifies a modernist emphasis on formal, aesthetic qualities of artworks. Because From the Seat of Authority contextualized the viewing experience in relationship to thematic ideas, they rejected the white cube and selected colors (shades of lavender and light minty greens, as well as the dark gray described above) that complemented...
the artworks while sometimes making tacit reference to exhibit themes. For example, in the rectangular gallery to the west of the staircase, most walls were painted a light lavender. Two silkscreen prints by Andy Warhol hung side-by-side in the center of the long wall that viewers encountered upon entering the gallery. The prints were identical depictions of Mao Tse-Tung, except for the ink colors. They were also visually distinguished from one another by a bold plum-colored line (approximately eight-inches wide) painted vertically on the wall between the prints and then extended horizontally above artworks hung to the left of the Warhol prints and below the works hung to the right. Three prints by other contemporary artists (Colin Self, Jim Dine and Richard Lindner) depicting all or part of the human body were hung to the left. A “plus” sign was adhered to the wall between each print, with an “equals” sign and text—“a curatorial construct for considering the social significance of gender, the body, and the gaze”—placed to the far left of the sequence of prints. To the right of the two Warhol prints, the curators placed three Japanese woodblock prints by Utagawa Hiroshige, with “plus” signs in between each and an “equals” sign at the far right, accompanied by text: “a curatorial construct for considering the interrelationship among celebrity, narrative and commodity” (figure 1).

![Figure 1. From the Seat of Authority exhibit installation. Photograph by Travis Fullerton.](image)

The text panel in this gallery read:

The gallery as frame . . .

Even when museum exhibitions seem to be singularly authored and ideologically neutral, they are imbued with multiple voices and personal preferences. Wall color, label copy, and the specific arrangement of artworks constitute a collection of selected choices and rejected options that frame a curatorial narrative. As we make our framing choices explicit, are you more (or less) inclined to challenge our curatorial authority to define aesthetic, cultural or historical significance of artworks?
The only wall in this gallery that was painted white ironically displayed two small paintings by a self-taught artist, Gertrude Morgan (as opposed to works by artists with canonical status). The tempera on cardboard paintings, one entitled “Jacob’s Well” and the other “Promiseland,” were accompanied by the following label:

As a self-taught painter, Morgan is typically considered to be an “outsider artist” (someone working outside the world of “fine art”). For her, painting was but one tool of her service to God. In 1934, while sitting alone in her kitchen, Morgan received a divine revelation that her life should be devoted to preaching the word of God. For over twenty years, she shouted and sang the Gospel in the streets of New Orleans while also establishing an orphanage and directing charitable social services, such as food distribution to the poor. She caught the attention of a local art dealer, who promoted her paintings and helped to get her songs recorded. How does knowledge of Morgan’s status as an “outsider artist” frame your opinion of her work?

While most object labels were shorter than the one accompanying Morgan’s paintings, each was carefully crafted to offer information about the artwork while also relating to one or more of the exhibit themes noted in nearby text panels. For example, the text panel placed in the first half of the gallery to the west of the staircase read:

A discursive space . . .

Viewers who uncritically read interpretations of selected artworks uphold a curator’s privileged seat of authority. We’d like to share our seat, inviting you to approach our labels as conversation-starters; conclusions are yours to make. However, our objective is not to deflate the museum’s status as a trusted institution. We grapple with our relationship to radical relativism in which any one opinion is as equally valid as another. Is it possible to straddle a fence between modernist faith in empirically established truth and postmodernist embrace of multiple perspectives?

Like their interest in the “museum as shrine” metaphor, student-curators became interested in the theme of curatorial authority from course readings, especially Helen Coxall’s essay, “How Language Means: An Alternative View of Museum Text” (1991). Coxall asserts, “[M]useums themselves have acquired a status of myth. Text accompanying their permanent collections are automatically imbued with a received aura of unquestioned truth” (p. 93). During exhibit development discussions, student-curators expressed ambivalence toward their assumed authoritative role. On the one hand, they recognized that they brought particular expertise to the project. On the other hand they were loath to invoke an authoritative tone that might be interpreted as telling visitors what to think. They expressed their ambivalence on the text panel cited above, as well as instilling it in some of the object labels. For example, the artworks displayed near this text panel included a 1971 serigraph by May Stevens entitled “Big Daddy Paperdoll,” which depicted bold silhouettes of men—some wearing uniforms assigned to people in various
authoritative roles, including police officer and military officer. The accompanying label offered information and a question that might prompt conversation (or thought) among viewers:

Who better to explain the work than the artist herself? This feminist caricature of a man in phallic silhouette is part of a series that Stevens explained:

I started with a portrait of my father, who was pro-war and pro-establishment . . . I showed him as a middle American in his undershirt, with his arms folded against his chest, and a blank television screen behind him. I expressed my disappointment and anger with my father and those like him. They were the people supporting the war.

When (if ever) should an artist’s statement be considered an authoritative explanation of the work?

Likewise, a label accompanying Robert Rauschenberg’s “From the Seat of Authority,” which hung next to “Big Daddy Paperdoll,” offered a “conversation starter” about the status of artists’ statements. It also represented the curatorial decision to use first person plural pronouns to indicate curatorial authorship (responding to new museological critique of anonymous curatorial authority typically presented in museum text panels):

We borrowed the title of this serigraph to name our exhibition, though our use of the artist’s words may not echo his thoughts as he juxtaposed images to create an ambiguous composition. Rauschenberg once expressed disdain for art criticism that offers declarative explanation and closes viewers’ open-minded experiences of artworks. Given the artist’s statement, how should we consider the relationship between the title of the work and the seemingly fragmented images included in the composition?

The term “fragmented images” prefaces the final exhibition theme, presented in the second half of the gallery to the west of the staircase, where student-curators hung contemporary artworks that incorporate visual references to earlier artists’ works and/or used collage techniques. For example, Barbara Ames’s 1995, mixed media/ektacolor print *Olympia* included a double self-portrait of the artist within a composition that mimicked Edouard Manet’s 1863 painting of the same name. Manet’s painting was scandalous when first displayed, because it depicted a reclining, nude white courtesan whose gaze confronted the viewer, while a fully clothed, black servant looked askance at the courtesan. The object label explained that Ames redefined herself both as courtesan and servant. By including fragments of Manet’s work evoking sexual and social politics alongside fragments from contemporary life, such as the television, Ames redefined herself, an artist, as a work of art and redefined the art forms of sculpture and painting within the physical reality of photography and printmaking.
Across the room, the curators presented artifacts from various countries, cultures and time periods—a pair of metal Temple Kinnari Birds made in Thailand around the turn of the twentieth century flanked artworks from three entirely different regions of the world: two fifteenth-century Iranian watercolor paintings that illustrated portions of the Shah Namah (“The Book of Kings” written by the Persian poet Ferdowsi around 1000 AD); an undated backstrap loom accompanied by sixteen miniature dolls wearing traditional Guatemalan clothing; and a late-twentieth-century stonecut print by Inuit artist Pudlo Pudlat, which was hung just above a case displaying three Inuit steatite carvings of a Sedna figure, a hunter figure, and a mother and child group (figure 2).

Figure 2. From the Seat of Authority exhibit installation. Photograph by Travis Fullerton.

The text panel placed between the selections of Euro-American artworks and the grouping of artworks and artifacts from various countries stated:

Fragments of fragments . . .

For centuries, artists have looked upon past artworks with a critical eye to convention, canonization, and socio-political contexts of creativity and production. Today, museum professional seeking to enact “new museology” are likewise engaged in self-reflexive examination of past museum practice, realizing that any one work of art or object of material culture represents a fragment of the broader context of its conception, creation, original function or cultural significance. What is gained by acknowledging such cultural fragmentation?

This final theme of the exhibition was inspired in part by Donald Preziosi’s “Introduction” in Grasping the World (2004), in which he asserts, “The plundering of Rome by [Napoleonic] Bonaparte left the great Museum [the city of Rome] in
ruined fragments, with the effect that all subsequent museums were fragments of fragments” (p. 17). Student-curators set works from various cultures apart from those that refer to Euro-American histories in order visually (albeit subtly) to acknowledge that the fragmentation of collected artworks from Euro-American contexts is qualitatively distinct from that of objects collected from other cultures. As Susan Vogel, director emeritus of the Museum of African Art in New York has explained, displays of objects from indigenous cultures convey meanings or interpretations that are significantly different than the intentions for which those artifacts were made. Indeed, the student-curators cited Vogel, offering her words, in vinyl lettering affixed to the wall upon which the aforementioned artifacts were arranged: “We are too far from the voices of the original owners and makers, too locked into the perspectives of our own culture, to presume to be faithful to the object in any exalted way. We can be faithful only in our own fashion” (193).

PORTRAITS: MORE THAN JUST A PRETTY FACE

Two years later, students enrolled in the Exhibitions class determined that, while drawing from new museological analyses, they would not develop an exhibition about museum practices. Instead, they addressed a parallel distinction between “old” and “new” scholarly practices characterized at a 1999 symposium at the Sterling and Francis Clark Art Institute and in a subsequent publication of essays entitled The Two Art Histories: The Museum and the University (Haxthausen, 2002). Generally speaking, participants at the symposium agreed that academic art history tends to focus on cultural contexts of artworks, often with an emphasis on social relations related to gender, class, race, sexuality, religion and/or ethnicity. Thus, “museum officials seem to regard academic art history as neglecting the pleasures of seeing” (Treuttner, 2002, p. 102). At the same time, university-based art historians criticize museums for casting “art as unique and sacred—as objects on a pedestal to be worshipped passively by adoring viewers” (Truettner, p. 110). The art history of museums is described as narrowly focusing on taxonomic categories and provenance. In other words, while the university has engaged in “new” or “revisionist” art history, the museum is described as having preserved “traditional” or “old” art history. The distinction between the two kinds of art history parallels the relationship between “old museology” and “new museology” insofar as the “new” in both areas of study have drawn from the same social and critical theories in their critiques and analyses.

Essays from the Clark symposium collectively were intended to bridge the gap between two art histories, in part by outlining how and why the two institutions historically diverged from one another. However the articulated differences between the university and the museum tacitly refute the likelihood of such a bridge coming to fruition. The greatest obstacles perceived among symposium participants seemed to be museums’ dependence on corporate sponsorship and emphasis on numbers of visitors, which were cast as purported reasons that the traditional museum experiences grounded in visual pleasure ought not be disrupted by an academic
interest in culturally contextualizing works of art or casting them within social relations of socio-cultural identities or differences.

Upon reading these essays, student-curators remarked that their project was not confined by the appeal to corporate sponsorship, and its audience was already involved in teaching/learning about various academic approaches to analyzing artworks. Thus the Anderson Gallery would be an ideal venue for presenting an exhibit designed to bridge the perceived gap between the two art histories. The resulting exhibition, *Portraits: More Than Just a Pretty Face* (figure 3), employed a standard, art museum “toolbox”—text panels, object labels, wall color, object placement, lighting—in a way that barely diverged from the white-cube gallery (three of the fourteen walls were painted a light beige, all others were white), and object labels offered no interpretation of individual artworks and artifacts beyond the standard “dog tag” information (artist’s name, followed by title date, medium and owner/collector of artworks). At the same time, the exhibition diverged from the “museum” approach described in *The Two Art Histories* in that its thematic text represented a densely theoretical essay by Eric Garberson (n.d.), Associate Professor in the VCUarts Department of Art History, whose research has examined ideas (assumptions and critiques of assumptions) surrounding the production and reception of portraits. Garberson takes a semiotic approach to understanding the shifting relationships between people who have made specific portraits, the people who are portrayed and the people viewing the portrait at the time and place it was made as well as in subsequent contexts.

![Figure 3. Portraits: More Than Just a Pretty Face exhibit installation. Photograph by Travis Fullerton.](image)

As noted in the exhibition brochure, the student-curators did not attempt to represent Garberson’s essay in its entirety but rather judiciously selected ideas that not only were cohesive with one another but also resonated with artworks available for exhibition—from the Anderson Gallery as well as from VCU Cabell Library Special Collections; local artists, galleries and collectors; and VCU students. The
overarching purpose of the exhibit was to suggest ways that artists (and other producers of visual culture) manipulate what Garberson calls “portrait codes,” through which the person portrayed becomes associated with all kinds of social categories. The student-curators were determined to avoid a text heavy presentation while accomplishing this goal. Thus rather than producing text panels, they presented brief statements, using vinyl lettering (approximately 3” high), on many walls throughout the exhibit. For example, in the rectangular gallery to the west of the staircase, two sentences were placed high above artworks displayed on the long wall opposite the doorway, which introduced the concept of portrait codes:

Portrait codes—posture, gaze, accoutrements, setting—can associate the person portrayed with all kinds of social categories: ruler, beggar, socialite, street-smart, pious, promiscuous, ugly, beautiful, gay, straight, entertainer, thief, etc. Criteria for membership in any category vary according to culture, place, and time.

Each of the other walls in this gallery focused on one of the aforementioned portrait codes. For example, the text on one wall read, “Who is doing the looking? Who is being looked at? Gaze—whether it belongs to the artist, the person portrayed or the viewer—invises social and psychological encounters that can be comfortable and familiar or peculiar and disarming.” The artworks hung on this wall presented a range of potential “psychological encounters.” For example, Cindy Sherman’s 1975 photograph, *Untitled Movie Still*, depicts the artist with her head tilted up and back, as she gazes beyond the frame inviting the viewer to gawk at her staged beauty. Conversely Chan Chow’s 1997 life-size photograph, *Untitled #5*, depicts a nude woman who disarmingly meets the viewers’ gaze.

Throughout the exhibition, student-curators arranged artworks to resonate with nearby text. For example, in the first half of the large gallery to the east of the staircase, text on one wall asserted:

The degree to which portraits conform to (or diverge from) ideal portrait types makes a statement about, and induces attitudes toward, the person portrayed. Artists achieve conformity or divergence by manipulating portrait codes and/or through the means of depiction, abstraction, naturalism, medium, and composition.

On this wall, paper currency depicting various historic leaders from ten different countries was displayed in a single frame. Next to this collection, also in a single frame, six pairs of black-and-white mug shots from the 1940s were presented. While paper currency and/or mug shots might not immediately be perceived as portraits, they function as such insofar as they depict specific identifiable individuals and assign them social status. Below this pair of collections a manotype, entitled *Groupthink*, by Richmond-based artist Mary Holland depicted Vice-President Dick Cheney, Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice and President George W. Bush, using bold lines and bright primary colors, mimicking a comic book or cartoon drawing.
While the print clearly represented early twenty-first-century leaders of the United States, Holland’s drawing style mocked their status. The juxtaposition of fine art and artifacts of popular or vernacular culture (baseball cards, movie stills, comic books), here and elsewhere in the exhibit, suggested the ubiquity of portraits in our daily lives.

Text on the opposite side of this portion of the large gallery asserted, “Portraits prompt viewers to assume personal or social relationships to the person portrayed as worshiper, voyeur, insubordinate, voyeur, loved one, etc.” Artworks displayed near this text depicted several familial pairs, e.g. mother and child (including Madonna and Christ), husband and wife as well as siblings; two sexually charged portraits—one of a young man reclining back onto a bed and the other a prepubescent girl in an odalisque pose; a frail elderly woman lying on a hospital bed; and a commissioned painting of an academic dean. The works evoked various emotional responses, thus the accompanying text also noted, “People who collect or display portraits associate themselves with the person portrayed or what the person stands for.”

The other half of the large gallery expanded upon the relationship between portrait and viewer, as the text on one wall noted, “Identity is malleable and ever changing. A portrait asserts or attributes identity to the person portrayed. However, exactly who is doing the asserting is an open question: Is it the maker of the portrait, the person portrayed, or the viewer?” Perhaps of greatest resonance with this text was the photograph *Daughter of Art History (Princess A)* by Japanese artist Yasumasa Morimura, who depicted his own face on the body of the princess represented in the 1656 painting *Las Meninas*, by Diego Velázquez. Numerous scholars have offered interpretations of the ambiguous relationship between the seventeenth-century painter (who appears in the background of the painting), the people depicted in the painting, and the viewer. Twentieth-century artist Morimura extends those uncertainties with his self-portrait, one of a series in which he inserted his face into canonical works of art. Other works in this section of the exhibition were more “traditional” portraits or self-portraits, in that they appeared to resemble the person portrayed, which is not to say that they necessarily offered intimate information about the people depicted. As text on another wall in this gallery cautioned, “Thanks to Romantic ideas from the 19th century, we have inherited an assumption that portraits capture the inner self, essential character, or the soul of the person portrayed. This assumption may still shape ways that viewers think about portraits, despite challenges from 20th-century theorists.” This assertion resonated with the text presented in the small gallery at the top of the stairs: “A portrait is not recognized as such because of its resemblance to the person portrayed but rather resemblance is perceived because it is a portrait.”

The text presented in vinyl lettering throughout the exhibit implicitly invited visitors to consider the artworks in relationship to the exhibit themes. However, insofar as labels did not apply the themes to individual artworks, visitors were not directed to consider how specific aspects of each artwork or artifact related to particular themes. In other words, viewers were free to “make meaning”, or not, from the juxtapositions of artworks and nearby text. Student-curators acknowledged, in the
exhibit brochure, that they held a liberal attitude toward what viewers might think. As they noted, their attitude was informed by late twentieth-century museological theory wherein museum visitors are considered to be actively “making meaning” rather than passively receiving information from museum exhibitions (Lawrence, 1991). In this sense, it is up to the museum visitor to complete the bridge between the so-called two art histories by scrutinizing how the portraits they encounter—in museums, galleries or vernacular contexts—manipulate visual codes to engage particular beliefs and desires.

PEDAGOGY OF SHARED AUTHORITY

Curators of both exhibitions, From the Seat of Authority and Portraits: More Than Just a Pretty Face, subscribed to a shared authority with exhibition viewers, which is not to say that they disavowed their expertise in museum studies or art history. Indeed, the practice of second-wave new museology is grounded in expert knowledge, to create “thought-provoking, moving, unsettling, uplifting, challenging” exhibitions that explore “critical disciplinary and trans-disciplinary ideas” and are informed by “questions of representation, perception [and] museological syntax” (MacDonald 2006, p. 9). The overarching educational objective is therefore not to edify supposed novices (as was prescribed in old museology), but rather to engage museum visitors in ideas that curators deliberate amongst themselves.

This relationship between curators and visitors is analogous to the relationship between instructor and student-curators that I cultivate in the exhibit development courses. Students are required to complete at least one graduate museum studies class before enrolling in the exhibits class. (There are three other regularly offered graduate courses at VCU, all of which interweave history, theory and practice while focusing on a specific area of museum work—collecting, education or administration.) This prerequisite ensures that students have some expertise in both old and new museology.

As indicated on the course syllabus, one semester is a remarkably short time in which to develop an exhibition. Students accordingly focus on accomplishing the task at hand, with discussion of reading assignments limited to their relevance to the exhibition as it is being planned. My role is described as “project director,” which means that I have the ultimate thumbs up/down on all aspects of the exhibition. Students’ roles are explicitly described as members of a team whose job is to reach consensus among themselves on ideas that they propose to me. I am, of course, present during the in-class deliberations. There are times when I stand back and listen to their discussions as they make decisions; other times when I steer their discussion by posing questions, repeating back to them the range of opinions I have heard from them, or asking students who are more reticent or introspective than others to express their thoughts; and yet other times when I explicitly dissuade or encourage specific suggestions, explaining specific criteria for dissuasion, which typically refer to either budget and design limitations or standards of practice in
label writing and thematic explication (i.e., points of training associated with old museology).

As project director and teacher who shares pedagogical authority with students, I assess the educative success of exhibitions in part from students’ reflective essays, submitted at the end of the semester. They typically remark that while the exhibits class has been the most gratifying class project of their graduate studies, it also challenged them in ways that other course work has not. For example, one student noted, “I saw how difficult it is to apply and live by the museum theory of my studies . . . [but] most of all, I felt creatively challenged, inspired and passionate” while working on the project. Their essays also delineated criteria for effective collaboration, which are inadequately described in museum studies literature, even though the profession generally subscribes to a team approach to exhibit development. According to students, effective collaboration unfolds when team members are self-directed, initiating research and bringing information to the group, without deciding their opinions or preferences in advance of group discussion. An effective team member separates herself from the project, welcoming and offering constructive criticism, knowing when to compromise and asking for clarification or assistance when needed. Discussions ideally are democratic, intellectually grounded and thoughtful, however heated debates do occur; the team member who diplomatically mediates or explores options is much preferred over one who staunchly defends a position. A sense of humor is appreciated, except when it impedes productivity with irrelevant remarks iterated at inopportune moments. Other highly valued qualities include creativity, flexibility, reliability, attention to detail, patience and ability to listen to others.

I now refer to the previous students’ characterization of effective collaboration when I teach the course. In this sense, the students have taught me how to be a better teacher/facilitator insofar as when the semester begins, I am able to clearly delineate the educational objectives—not only to complete exhibition plans and design but also to demonstrate an ability to work collaboratively. I recall one student’s remark, in her reflective essay, that the process of reaching consensus was “anxiety ridden,” but that difficulties along the way made the result “that much more rewarding.” The anxiety along the way is to be expected, particularly because the students’ work results in a public presentation, open to scrutiny from a museum-going public who is perhaps unaccustomed to exhibitions grounded in second-wave new museology.

Visitor reaction to the student-curated exhibitions—beyond the kudos of friends, families and colleagues—was not systematically gauged. However a critical review of *From the Seat of Authority* published in a local newspaper suggested that there is a receptive audience for second-wave new museology. Critic Becky Shields (2008) characterized the exhibit as a “practical experiment in museology” and “a unique event in the theory-heavy world of academia.” She clearly understood the main ideas represented by the exhibition, and noted a paradox that had not occurred to the student curators: “Of course, for all its revolutionary fervor, . . . [the exhibit] can’t avoid framing, a reality that creates a palpable tension throughout the gallery. Pompous though it may be, that frame also protects an investment.” In other words, the art museum will always
hold a privileged status, which is the very reason that it is an appropriate venue for producing projects that enact second-wave new museology. Its authoritative status need not be diluted as theory-laden knowledge is translated into accessible, albeit sophisticated, exhibitions that address visitors as co-investigators of ideas associated with the production, interpretation and display of artworks and artifacts.

NOTES
1 From the Seat of Authority was curated by Casey Brent, Christina Esposito, Frankie Geouge, Hanne Hagen Pettersen, Katie Klein, Jenna Kowalke, Kristi Mathews, Jolene Milot, Chasity Miller, and Jennifer Pat
2 Portraits: More Than Just A Pretty Face was curated by Martha Allison, Samantha Best, Amanda Bryan, Claire Dixon, Libby Girard, Amy Lenhardt and Megan Rupnik.

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AFFILIATION
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The schoolboy learning physics *is* a physicist, and it is easier for him to learn physics behaving like a physicist than doing something else (Bruner, 1960, p.16).

Even though historians describe history as a “problem solving” discipline, rarely do students or teachers explicitly see, let alone practice, the *processes*—evidentiary investigation, analysis, and interpretation—with which historians solve historical problems (Sheets, 2010). “Historians know that there is a distinct difference between history (the product of their investigations) and the past (VanSledright, 2010, p.114).” Yet, that distinction is lost on history students as the public distribution of these practitioners’ work is largely limited to sharing the *products* of their research—the already interpreted artifacts and stories.

In K-12 schools, this often means a reliance on textbooks to reveal “the” singular history of an event or era, leading students to form powerful allegiances to the literal meaning of textbooks and to view the versions of history contained within as “what really happened” (VanSledright, 2002, p.1095). In undergraduate programs, lecture-based survey courses remain the norm. At historic sites, the products of research most frequently encountered are the interpretive panels and programs that *describe* historical content or concepts, primarily emphasizing knowledge transmission and imaginative immersion, rather than the opportunity to engage in the analysis and construction of history (Handler & Gable, 1997; Hooper-Greenhill, 2007; Tal & Morag, 2007). Rarely do students, at any grade level, encounter the opportunity to engage in the processes by which those historical understandings come to light. Instead, we ask students to learn from work other people have done and lament that students neither enjoy history nor understand it as well as those who have crafted it.

The often-argued solution to the problem is better education. However, better history education does not simply mean *more* of what we have been doing, as the wealth of scholarship in history education indicates that much of what has been done has not changed the widespread perception of history as a static collection of names and dates. Accordingly, we must reconsider the fundamental structure of how we teach history at every level—from K-12 education through university, but especially at the critical nexus of pre-service teacher education—placing at the heart of it *History Laboratory* experience.

Since Bruner’s (1960) entreaty to put disciplinary knowledge and structures at the center of teacher and student education, educators in the physical and natural sciences have spent the subsequent decades putting the work of *being* a scientist within reach.
of even the youngest children. They have developed laboratory protocols to teach the basic principles of science and the scientific method to students from pre-school through university. As part of their training to become teachers, pre-service science teachers learn basic laboratory techniques and how to teach using those procedures. Accordingly, science centers, botanical, and zoological organizations and museums have developed interactive, hands-on programming based on these essential scientific concepts and skills to closely align with classroom practices. As such, the programs and practices found in science museums fully augment the science taught in schools.

There remain, however, no corresponding laboratory structures to ensure that pre-service history teachers – and thus their students -- have sufficient hands-on experience analyzing and interpreting historical materials. As a result, teachers in K-12 schools, constrained by curriculum and the clock, tend to emphasize an historical narrative consisting of the “most true” version of events (Sandwell, 2005). While informal educational settings —historic sites, houses, museums, archives,— attempt to serve school groups by creating programs that are more participatory, inclusive, and dialogic than they have been in the past (Handler and Gable, 1992; Simon, 2010; Tchen, 1992), they often do not align with in-class curriculum. Both sides, then, rely upon transmitting narrative experiences to students in the attempt to increase students’ understanding of history. For students, though, there remains a sense that history is series of factual catechisms to be memorized and quickly forgotten.

Developing a system of History Laboratories would provide a mechanism to ensure students engage the problem-solving processes of history and that teachers can meaningfully integrate those processes back into the classroom. For students of history, however, these laboratories will not be filled with beakers and vials of bubbling potions. Instead, they must provide experience working with the artifacts that tell the stories of the past, and the history professionals—historians, curators, educators—who work with the processes of historical investigation—the researching, analysis, and constructing of history—daily. As such, informal learning sites must work in close partnership with formal education institutions to develop the structures and procedures necessary to make History Laboratories part of the experience of all history students.

HISTORIANS AND THE POWER OF THE OBSERVATIONAL APRENTICESHIP

The perception of history as a collection of “essential facts” that function as the “multiplication tables of history … to be known as automatically as those in arithmetic” (Barr, Barth, & Shermis, 1977 pp. 20–21), derives mainly from the “observational apprenticeships” history students, engage in while sitting in history classrooms and lecture halls from their elementary through collegiate experiences (VanSledright, 2011). Lecture, the dominant method of teaching used by university-based academic historians, is often the only expression of the work of the profession most students see. The years of study and research, the choosing of sources, the
weighing of evidence, even the effort necessary to craft lectures takes place well out of sight of students. The message historians send, however unintentional, is that they are “repositories of knowledge” (Shoemaker, 2009) and that teaching history is a “unidirectional process” that involves “conveying/sharing/transmitting scholarship to uninformed student minds (VanSledright, 2011, p.188).” Accordingly, few students, even in college, hold intermediate or advanced conceptions of the work of historians as synthesizers constructing particular theories of history, replete with their own biases that are repeatedly corroborated or dismissed by their peers (Hyndshanahan, Holschuh, & Hubbard, 2004; Lee & Ashby, 2000; Wineburg, 1991).

The formidable challenge of history teacher education then becomes to countermand much of this decades–long observational apprenticeship, exposing students to the work of historians, often for the first time, and then preparing them, often in a mere semester or two, to teach with these new-found understandings.

CHANGING THE MODEL

For many years, in many different permutations, historians and history educators have devised myriad university-based, grant-funded programs and projects to facilitate the shift from knowledge-transmission to a problem-solving history and social studies instruction (cf., Brown, 1996; Dow, 1991; Nash, Crabtree, & Dunn, 1997; Symcox, 2002). These projects ebb and flow for a predictable constellation of reasons. Funding comes through, and there is a great rush of activity. Concentrating on the project work, participants rely heavily upon the creative force inherent within the project to gain converts to its particular methods or materials. In doing so, they fail to fully integrate the administration of the project into the regular workings of their institutions. Accordingly, once grant funding ends, so does the work. Without other viable options, teacher education reverts back to the default model. Thus, the solution to the current problem cannot be yet another ‘exception’ to the regular workings of the teacher education model. It requires a redesign of the fundamental structure of history teacher education working within the existing teacher preparation institutions.

In November 2010, the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), the largest teacher-education accrediting agency in the country, released its multi-year study of the state of teacher education programs. The panel urged Schools of Education not to build another series of ‘exceptional’ programs, but rather to fully redesign their programs to ensure that “laboratory-based experiences” and “clinical preparation” are fully integrated throughout the teacher candidates’ coursework, across all subject areas (Levine, 2010).

Currently, there is no formal set of criteria for providing laboratory experience as related to history. Yet, it is clear that students need laboratory experience to ensure sufficient opportunities for hands-on work analyzing and interpreting historical materials. I propose that we situate the history laboratory experience at historic sites, bringing the sites and the history professionals at them, directly into the formal process of history education and teacher preparation.
While historic sites have long supported K-12 education and have become increasingly involved in teacher professional development, the critical difference in what is proposed here is the structure for working with teachers and their students. It is an end to the notion that an historic site can fulfill its educational mission relying upon single-day short-term, field trip visits for K-12 classes—visits that are increasingly burdensome for teachers to organize and often poorly integrated back into classroom curriculum (Baron, 2013). Rather, it is the beginning of a long-term commitment to directly working with teachers to provide them, not just their students, with the much-needed experience working directly with historic materials so that they may fully integrate the skills and deep understandings of the complexities of history into K-12 education, independent of whether or not their students ever set foot on site.

HISTORIC SITES AND TEACHER EDUCATION

In their efforts to improve history education, states and school districts have increasingly involved historic sites in student learning and teacher professional development, but rarely in formal pre-service teacher education. Most recently, historic sites’ most sustained presence in formal education has been via the TAH grant program. The largest federal initiative to improve history education in a generation, TAH grants included the requirement that grantees partner with museums, historic sites, or archives—an acknowledgment of the important role historic sites can have in improving history education (Melendez, 2008).

However, nearly a decade’s worth of TAH program analysis revealed that historic sites were under-utilized in most TAH programs (Humphrey, Chang-Ross, Donnelly, Hersh, & Skolnik, 2005; USDOE, 2011). Program reports show that when teacher professional development programs are situated at historic sites, the site staff presents materials significantly less often than do visiting professors (Humphrey, et. al., 2005) indicating that many historic sites may ‘host’ programs, but may not be deeply engaged in the instruction. The visiting professors, when at the sites, rarely engaged the teachers in documentary, artifact, or building analysis, but rather in “show and tell” sessions in which they employed passive instructional methods, particularly lecture (Hall & Scott, 2007; Long, 2006; Moyer, Onosko, Forcey, & Cobb, 2003; Pesick & Weintraub, 2003; Sheets, 2010; Warren, 2007; Zeisler-Vralsted, 2003). Within TAH programs historic sites are most often used as passive “field trips” rather than opportunities for active analysis. Accordingly, project participants have shown improvement in historical content knowledge, but they continue to lag behind in evincing improved analytical skills or historical thinking (Humphreys, 2005; USDOE, 2011).

Presumably, historic sites are included in these programs and grants because of the expertise of the staff and access to authentic historic places and materials available at these sites. Yet even in these programs designed to showcase the depth of materials available at historic sites, teachers typically encounter historic sites in
the context of single-visit field trip programs, offering little chance for meaningful, extended interactions with staff or materials. While some of this may be program logistics, it is likely an indication of the perception among professors that museums and historic sites are solely for enrichment, not education (Tal & Steiner, 2006; Tal, Bamberger, & Morag, 2005).

Part of the decision to use historic sites solely for single-visit experiences may be based in misunderstandings about what teachers derive from their visits to historic sites. Recent studies indicate that there is virtually no overlap in how historians and teachers encounter or analyze historic sites. Historians encounter historic sites as documents to be read, employing analytical strategies that help them discern the meaning of both the available evidence and missing or unavailable information (Baron, 2012). With such a point of view, it is easy to see how historians, who are largely responsible for developing TAH programs, would envision mere proximity to historic resources to be sufficient prompts for historical analysis into teachers’ understanding of a historical time period, person, or event. From their perspective, it is all that is necessary.

However, experienced teachers, even when provided with extended analytical preparation do not ‘read’ historic sites as historians. (Baron, 2013) First, teachers do not enter the historic site alone, but with the concern for and memory of the needs of their students, both past and present. Accordingly, analysis of the content is filtered, not through their understanding of the historical materials, but rather through their understanding of the needs of their students. Rather than seeing the historic site as a document to be read, they encounter it as a ‘tool’ for presentation that raises pedagogical and logistical questions and concerns (Baron, 2013). Thus, attempts to meaningfully incorporate historic sites into professional development come too late in the process for teachers to learn to use the historic sites as historic materials in their own right.

HISTORIC SITES AS LABORATORIES FOR TEACHER PREPARATION

For historic sites to play more than a cursory role in history education, it is in pre-service teacher preparation—not just in the professional development work of programs like TAH—that historic sites need to become involved. Pre-service programs offer the only opportunity many teachers may have to encounter historic sites purely as learning experiences for themselves, rather than filtering it through the perceived needs of their students. Therefore, it is critical to create an analytical foundation on which teachers may draw when they return to historic sites either with their students or in professional development seminars.

As history professors are responsible for providing content instruction, and education professors for pedagogy instruction, historic sites must provide the opportunity for pre-service teachers to apply and expand their skills in historical analysis, interpretation, and teaching strategies that they learned from both.

Grounded in the research literature on expert/novice studies (Anderson, 1987; Bruner, 1960; Chi, Feltovitch, & Glasier. 1981; Chi, Glasier, & Rees, 1982; Leinhardt
& Young, 1996; Wineburg 1991; 1998), the guiding principles of history laboratory work is to be inquiry-based, experiential work based on the disciplinary skills and structures employed by history practitioners—both public and academic—who do history daily. While there are individual, often single-visit programs that support these goals, historic sites, in partnership with teacher education programs, need to develop a set of procedures for repeated exposure to the historic site that cultivate progressive skills, content, and pedagogical development in relation to different types of historical materials, documents, buildings, and material culture of primary import.

The work within these history laboratories would provide hands-on opportunities for teachers to take part in that construction of history using authentic historic materials and places, so that they may be able to provide similarly authentic experiences for their students. Distinct from single-visit field trip experiences, history laboratories would enable historic sites to offer pre-service teachers the opportunity to engage historic sites through:

- **Repeated exposure** to the historic site and its materials over the course of a semester or longer.
- **Progressive skill development** designed to expose pre-service teachers to the best practices of both history and museum education.
- **Practice teaching others** in a low-stakes environment (relative to a state curriculum/test-driven classroom environment).

Rather than existing solely as a free-standing program for teachers, history laboratories would necessarily be embedded within the structures of university-based teacher preparation programs. This could be accomplished either through a reallocation of existing instructional time in the history and education courses to include laboratory experience or the development of a separate 2-credit laboratory course to augment the existing structure.

**DEVELOPING THE CONTENT OF LABORATORY WORK**

Currently, there is no formal set of criteria for providing laboratory experience as related to history or historic sites, so there is considerable room for experimentation and growth. Historic sites, history and education professors would need to come together to discuss the particulars of any partnership. Emphasis should be on creating as many points of overlap within both the skills and content covered in each of the three course sections.

Let us imagine such a course set in Boston, with the Old North Church as the historic site-based laboratory. Accordingly, the focus for one section of the course would be the story of Paul Revere and the hanging of the lanterns. Within the records of the Old North Church, there is considerable controversy surrounding this event. Two families claim that their ancestors, either Robert Newman, the church sexton,
or Captain John Pulling, a friend and business associate of Revere’s hung the lantern. Each side has mounted a case for more than 200 years regarding why their ancestor could have been the only one to have hung the lanterns.

From this starting point, in the history methods course, the history professor could work with students to do the investigatory work, pulling materials from the Old North Church’s archives, weighing the claims made on either side, consider the historiographical implications of statements made by relatives on the Centennial and Bicentennial celebrations.

Meanwhile in the history education course, the education professor would introduce Wineburg’s (1991; 1998) work on documentary analysis and historical thinking. Using those same documents that they uncovered in the archive, pre-service teachers would develop and practice micro-teaching lessons related to this particular topic.

Finally in the laboratory section of the course, working with the museum educators, pre-service teachers would work to communicate that same research via different media—objects or sections of the building—that present a different story than the one found in the documentary evidence and how they work to reconcile those disparities. Pre-service teachers might also have the opportunity to test out some of their lessons and materials with visitors.

When these pre-service teachers move into their own classrooms, having had the opportunity to encounter the processes by which historical knowledge is created, manipulated, constructed, and politicized, they can confidently provide similar experiences for their students without relying upon “the obvious, cheerful, and stereotypical” (Levstik, 2000, p.290) banalities that threaten to bore and mislead students about the persons and events that comprise a complex past.

MOVING BEYOND INTERNSHIPS

Laboratory work is not to be confused with “internships,” as internships tend to focus on learning to work in museums. The goal of the proposed program is not to create museum educators, but K-12 educators who understand how to use the materials and methods found at history museums in their own classrooms. Thus, the emphasis with these laboratories would be to help teachers learn the work of analyzing and interpreting historical materials—using the content specific to the historic site—in a series of progressively structured sessions so that they may bring those experiences directly to their classrooms.

Nor is laboratory work intended to make pre-service teachers “experts” at working in museums. Yet, as Trofaneko (2006) suggests, education in the historic site needs to, in some ways, also be about the historic site. The ideal shift would be to move pre-service teachers from “novices” seeking merely positive experiences at museums, to “advanced amateurs” who understand and are interested in the content offered and can effectively participate in planning their visits with their future students (Twiss Houting, Taylor, & Watts, 2010, p. 26). Achieving this alone, with teachers not yet
in the classroom, would radically transform the teachers’ relationships with museum educators as well as their understanding of the role that museums can play in their classrooms.

WHY HISTORIC SITES SHOULD GET INVOLVED

For historic sites, this new model comes at a critical time. Historic sites willing to work with pre-service teacher-education programs will have the opportunity to not only change the model for interaction between teachers and historic sites, but solve a critical problem in the field of teacher education. With an emphasis on seat-time, standardized testing, expanded web-based program offerings, and soaring transportation costs, fewer students go to historic sites on field trips. Historic sites have struggled with how to adapt to these changes. Not only would developing laboratories provide the historic sites with an enhanced model for working with teachers, but offer a critical way to fulfill their educational mission in the absence of traditional fieldtrips.

With the success of the Teaching American History grant programs, teacher education is already part of the normal scope of work performed at historic sites. A sign of that success, several states, with Pennsylvania (2010) at the fore, are considering allowing pre-service teachers to do part of their fieldwork in museums and historic sites. Before waves of pre-service teachers begin to flood into historic sites, we need to ensure that they are engaging in meaningful learning opportunities. One possibility is to engage them in the development and refinement of history laboratories materials and structures during their tenure.

Teacher education programs are offered at multiple institutions in every state, frequently close to historic sites and structures. These sites may be under-used or valued, if, for example, they lack a ‘national’ story. However, if the emphasis is on the process by which that story was constructed, the perceived importance of that story is almost irrelevant. In this way, even the smallest historic site can stand on equal footing with the largest. To wit: The processes by which one uses archival documents to piece together the life of George Washington of Mt. Vernon, Virginia are the same processes one would use to piece together the lives of relatively obscure or locally-known figures like J.P. Marquand of Newburyport, MA. Thus, opening up the opportunities for lesser-known historic sites to serve their communities and build audiences with teachers.

With a clear, replicable structure, it is possible to set up a network of laboratories that teachers could visit, either in pre-service training, as part of exchanges, or with their classes to practice the essential skills, while learning the content and conundrums peculiar to each site. These laboratories would provide more intensive opportunities for both structured and self-directed learning than the current model permits.

Ultimately, though, it is the students of these pre-service teachers who will benefit the most. Teachers facile with both the content and methodologies employed by
HISTORIC SITES’ ROLE IN TEACHER EDUCATION

history practitioners, can provide access to the challenges and joys of doing history, that have, until now, been the sole province of experts. For students, it means developing the analytical skills necessary to consistently assess historical materials both on-site and in their classrooms, narrowing the gap between the two.

CONCLUSION

In answer to Bruner’s entreaty more than a half century ago, it is time to fully and consistently provide students with access the deep disciplinary structures of history. We must take the opportunity inherent in NCATE’s call to incorporate laboratory experience for all pre-service teachers to fundamentally change the model we use to train history teachers. Accordingly, university-based history departments and schools of education should enter into triadic partnerships with historic sites to develop history laboratories that ensure pre-service teachers have sufficient opportunities for hands-on work analyzing and interpreting historical materials so they may provide the same for their students.

REFERENCES

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