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## The Modern Museum: A Supplemental Instructional, Curriculum, and Developmental Tool

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**Abstract.** Museum education has changed dramatically in recent years, creating new opportunities for higher education faculty to integrate museums into evidence-based teaching and learning. Technology, innovation, and professional development have expanded museums' capacity to support undergraduate and graduate instruction across disciplines through interactive exhibits and distance learning that connect students with experts and collections otherwise inaccessible. Framed through the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), this InStruct article positions museums as course-integrated learning environments and provides practical, adaptable strategies aligned to learning outcomes. It emphasizes course-embedded evidence to assess and refine museum-based learning that deepens engagement and disciplinary thinking.

Museum education has changed dramatically in recent years, presenting higher education faculty with expanded opportunities to integrate museums into undergraduate and graduate instruction. Technology, innovation, and professional development have expanded museums' capacity to support course learning outcomes through interactive exhibits, virtual programming, and access to subject-matter experts and collections. When intentionally aligned to course objectives, museum-based experiences can function as evidence-based teaching strategies that support active learning, disciplinary thinking, and experiential learning. These environments also provide a context in which faculty can examine student learning through course-embedded evidence and systematic inquiry within the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL).

This InStruct article is written for higher education faculty seeking practical, evidence-based strategies for integrating museums into undergraduate and graduate courses. The manuscript advances three focused claims: (1) museums can be intentionally aligned to course learning outcomes as course-integrated learning environments; (2) technology-enabled museum experiences (e.g., interactive virtual learning, QR-supported inquiry, and simulation/gaming) can expand access and deepen disciplinary thinking; and (3) faculty-museum partnerships can be designed as systematic inquiry within the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) by collecting and analyzing course-embedded evidence of student learning. The sections that follow emphasize practical teaching strategies and assessment approaches that faculty can adapt across the humanities, STEM, and professional programs.

### Modern Curriculum and the Interactive Museum

Interactive curriculum continues to grow increasingly more popular across the United States, and parallel trends are evident in higher education where active learning, experiential curriculum, and technology enhanced instruction are widely promoted. Distance learning and online learning have been part of postsecondary education for decades, and even those institutions not offering online options utilize the format in how students engage with content, experts, and various disciplines. As faculty increasingly design courses around measurable learning objectives, an approach found in both synchronous and asynchronous learning, some may ask why museums have not fully capitalized on these opportunities for partnerships in pedagogy. The answers vary as much as museum content and likely include cost, infrastructure, staffing, outreach, and major concerns that a drop in physical attendance will negatively impact the future of the museum. For higher education faculty, the key issue is how museum experiences can be intentionally aligned to course learning outcomes and assessed through course-embedded evidence (e.g., short analytic writing, structured reflections, or other performance tasks) as part of evidence-based teaching and SoTL-informed improvement.

Education has been a foundation of the museum since it was conceptualized. The birth of the modern museum is argued, but some believe it can be linked to the French Revolution (Prottis, 2019). The purpose of museums has changed over time, but in general, they have been designed to present a period of the past, discipline, or display artifacts, antiquities, or ideas in a way that spectators can learn from (Dressler & Kan, 2018). However, the modern museum maintains this mission with one addition: interaction. Interactive museums have grown in popularity and transformed museum pedagogy and the experience traditionally expected from a museum visit (DiCindo, 2019). Progressive museums continue to grow in popularity due to society's appetite for technology-infused learning, and

the role of the museum educator has been transformed to feed this hunger. For faculty, this shift matters because it creates opportunities for structured learning activities that move beyond observation toward inquiry, analysis, and disciplinary practice.

The twenty-first century has brought remarkable technological advancements to classroom environments. Colleges and universities have likewise expanded technology-enhanced teaching, and many museums witness similar challenges: budgetary constraints, physical space limitations, and continued community support (Gaylord-Opalewski & O'Leary, 2018). However, as funding becomes readily available, technology and interactive programs have changed museum education in significant ways.

### **Virtual Learning**

Interactive Virtual Learning (IVL) programs have become increasingly popular at museums across the globe. Having the ability to “bring an ocean expert to a classroom in Indiana,” or “connect college students studying art history in Philadelphia with a curator in Paris working at a museum that houses the largest collection of Monet,” through virtual learning or video chat technology has changed museum curators, historians, and experts’ role in education (Gaylord-Opalewski & O'Leary, 2019, p. 229). In fact, the utilization of virtual museums can help create a “less restrictive learning environment,” expand students’ access to material, and reinforce curriculum (Gaylord-Opalewski & O'Leary, 2019, p. 229).

For higher education faculty, these approaches are transferable across a multitude of disciplines. Humanities instructors can use virtual access to galleries or archival material to engage otherwise inaccessible primary sources and support close analysis and argumentation. In the hard sciences, faculty can leverage museum simulations and interactive exhibits to strengthen scientific reasoning and model-based data analysis. In professional programs like education, public administration, or criminal justice, museum partnerships can support civic learning by situating course concepts in authentic community contexts. In each case, higher education faculty can align the museum experience with dedicated learning outcomes and gather evidence of student learning through course-embedded activities, assessments, and tasks. This alignment also supports SoTL by giving faculty a clear way to evaluate whether museum-based learning improves engagement or disciplinary thinking and to refine instructional design over time.

Although faculty bring subject-matter expertise and course structure to students, the ability to utilize museum experts and museum educators through distance learning can strengthen learning experiences in ways that are difficult to replicate in a traditional classroom setting. Research has suggested that Interactive Virtual Learning and Virtual History Museums (VHM) can support concrete learning experiences and reinforce curriculum. The logistics of transporting exhibits and archival material are also challenging. Providing interactive means through distance education augmented by technology provides greater access for students and faculty seeking meaningful instructional opportunities and, in some cases, professional development.

Quick Response (QR) codes have also become a popular option for sharing museum material. Museums possess the capability to virtually offer specific artwork or exhibits by placing a QR code in a physical environment, and when scanned on a mobile device or tablet, museumgoers are provided an experience that meshes physical and virtual elements of a museum. “Traditional exhibitions present viewers with physical objectives in a curated, tangible space, often routing them along a suggested path,” (Dressler & Kan, 2018, p. 161). By offering QR access, spectators can control their experience, momentum, and depth of inquiry and engagement. For faculty, QR-supported pathways can be paired with guided prompts (observation questions, comparison tasks, and short analytic writing) that produce assessable artifacts aligned to course outcomes.

### **Gaming Culture**

Gaming culture and manipulating technology to “play” games or modules are not new to this century. In fact, PC gaming and gaming consoles have been around for several decades. However, museum educators have not taken advantage of this type of technology in the museum setting until recent years. The rise in popularity of digital technology and gaming culture has made its way into interactive exhibits and displays to attract museum traffic and offer a new experience. Offering choice in manipulating exhibits through games and active interaction, learning is further solidified, and foundational information and skills are reinforced. For higher education faculty, these interactive elements can be incorporated as structured learning tasks (e.g., observation logs, hypothesis testing, or short

analytic reflections) rather than treated as informal “play,” allowing instructors to assess learning outcomes through course-embedded evidence.

Museums that focus on the hard sciences are ripe with opportunities to offer the gaming experience as part of their interactive model. Science and technology are interrelated, and it seems evident that these types of museums would incorporate tech into their exhibition space (Heering, 2017). The simulation experience has grown in popularity, and studies indicate that students can perform at high levels of cognitive understanding and retention in simulation-based environments (Korman et al., 2016). Additionally, research also points to generational gaps in the perception of gaming, interactive displays, and manipulatives, with younger participants performing at higher levels than elderly adults. This balance can be difficult for some museums, as in order to reach max participation, they must accommodate growing trends that impact visitor participation. For higher education contexts, this challenge can be addressed by faculty providing clear learning prompts and expectations that guide students’ interaction with simulations toward disciplinary thinking (e.g., model-based reasoning, data interpretation, or systems thinking), while also maintaining accessibility for diverse learners.

**...higher education faculty can benefit from these developments by partnering with museums...**

Museum educators, curators, and administrators will be impacted by changes in technology and how it impacts their mission, curriculum, and educational approach in the future if they hope to meet the needs of students and museumgoers of all ages. At the same time, higher education faculty can benefit from these developments by partnering with museums to select or design simulation-based experiences that align with course outcomes and provide assessable student artifacts.

### **A Training Ground for Students and Educators**

Museums have long been revered as places of education for students, offering an extension to curriculum and as a means to augment classroom material (Anderson, 1992). However, for many, museums have been underutilized as a place where educators, scholars, and academics can grow professionally and in a specific content area. Additionally, the role of museums and how they fit into overarching educational pedagogy has been debated throughout the last century and continues to be redeveloped and reevaluated (Anderson, 1992). For higher education faculty, museums can function not only as instructional settings for students, but also as professional learning environments where instructors explore new methods for experiential learning, evaluate student engagement, and refine course design through evidence-based teaching.

#### **Focused Curriculum**

Established curriculum, whether driven by institutional requirements, program outcomes, accreditation expectations, or departmental goals, offers focus areas to colleges and universities. All communities have their own unique needs, and curriculum is often modified to meet those specific challenges. One of the most significant issues that separates classroom-based education and museum education is their focus. In higher education, faculty design curriculum to meet established learning outcomes, disciplinary standards, and degree expectations, while also preparing students for professional lifelong learning.

Museums have a different focus, however. Education is, of course, the most obvious focus area, but no mandates drive their direction in the same way (Anderson, 1992). Curriculum is not universally shared between museum educators, and a number of external factors may change focus areas. Although this may appear to impact the mission of a museum negatively, there are advantages to be embraced. Museums are able to modify their curriculums, sometimes in significant ways, to meet the needs of educators and the communities in which they serve. When Interactive Virtual Learning or Virtual History Museums models are used, museum educational programs expand to an even greater audience. For higher education faculty, this flexibility can be an advantage: museum content and programming can be selected to support course learning outcomes, and instructors can structure engagement (pre-briefing, guided inquiry, and post-visit synthesis) to ensure the museum experience functions as an assessable part of the course rather than a standalone event.

#### **Theories in Action**

Not all sentiments in this area are shared in supporting changes occurring in the modernization of museums. Science museums are particularly transitioning to interactive and technology-based presentation models. The fear from some museum curators is grounded in the thought that the further away one moves away from the fundamentals, the greater chance students will misunderstand scientific laws, concepts, and theories (Heering, 2017). By involving ideas of how science functions in society, social issues, or the “whole science” approach, storytelling can depart the conversation from theoretical conclusions on the best way to teach the subject matter.

Similar debates exist in higher education, where faculty sometimes question whether highly interactive or simulation-based learning risks oversimplifying complex disciplinary concepts if activities are not carefully structured. For higher education faculty, the instructional implication is not to avoid interactive museum experiences, but to design them intentionally. When museum-based activities are aligned to course learning outcomes and paired with guided prompts, analytic writing, or performance tasks, interaction can reinforce disciplinary reasoning rather than replace it. From a SoTL perspective, these concerns can be addressed through systematic inquiry—collecting course-embedded evidence of student understanding before and after the museum-based activity and using results to refine the approach.

## Collaboration

Collaboration between museum educators and educators across other sectors has improved expeditiously. For higher education faculty specifically, these partnerships are especially productive when approached as evidence-based teaching initiatives. During the 1980s, this relationship was examined, and results showed a significant disconnect between the groups (Sanger, et al., 2015). This relationship has morphed into a mutually beneficial arrangement due to “strengthening advisory panels, professional development programs, and collaboratively developing curriculum guides” (Sanger, et al., 2015, p. 146).

Web-based technology continues to show promise by bringing together those who traditionally would not have been able to work together due to geographical separation. From a SoTL perspective, such partnerships can be designed as systematic inquiries in which faculty articulate learning outcomes, implement museum-based learning activities, and use course-embedded evidence to evaluate and refine pedagogical choices. In practice, the strongest partnerships are often those in which faculty and museum educators co-design a learning experience with clear outcomes, structured student tasks, and an agreed-upon form of assessment.

## InStruct Applications: Museum-Based Teaching Strategies for Higher Education

The strategies below are designed for immediate adoption in undergraduate or graduate courses. Each strategy includes a suggested student task, a course-embedded artifact for assessment, and an example of how faculty can collect course evidence for SoTL-informed reflection and improvement.

- **Virtual Curator Q&A (any discipline):** Students attend a live museum expert session (Zoom/IVL) and submit an annotated transcript excerpt that identifies key claims, evidence, and disciplinary methods. Course evidence: annotated excerpt plus a 250–500 word reflection tied to course outcomes. Assessment can use a short rubric (accuracy, use of evidence, disciplinary reasoning).
- **Object-Based Inquiry Brief (humanities/social sciences):** Students select one artifact/exhibit item and write a 1–2 page inquiry brief using a Claim–Evidence–Reasoning structure supported by exhibit labels and two course readings. Course evidence: inquiry brief. Assessment focuses on argument quality, sourcing, and interpretation.
- **QR-Code Guided Pathway (any discipline, in-person or virtual):** Faculty design a guided museum “path” using QR codes or a shared link list. Students complete a structured worksheet that prompts observation, comparison, and application of a course concept. Course evidence: completed worksheet plus a concept map. Assessment focuses on conceptual accuracy and connections.
- **Simulation/Gaming Lab Reflection (hard sciences):** Students complete a museum simulation and submit a lab-style reflection that includes a hypothesis, observations, a data table, and interpretation. Course evidence: lab reflection. Assessment focuses on reasoning, data interpretation, and model-based thinking.
- **Museum-Based Case Study Memo (professional programs):** Students analyze an exhibit as a case (policy, ethics, leadership, or public communication) and produce a short memo recommending an action using

course frameworks. Course evidence: memo. Assessment focuses on application of theory, ethical reasoning, and feasibility.

- **Comparative Exhibit Analysis (humanities):** Students compare two exhibits (or two museums virtually) and evaluate how interpretation, narrative, and audience shape understanding. Course evidence: comparative analysis. Assessment focuses on use of evidence, disciplinary framing, and clarity.
- **Community-Engaged Micro-Product (any discipline):** Students design a small public-facing product (digital label, mini-exhibit text, short audio-guide script) grounded in course content and museum materials. Course evidence: product plus a short design rationale. Assessment focuses on accuracy, audience awareness, and reflection.
- **SoTL Mini-Cycle (faculty implementation):** Faculty implement one strategy, collect student artifacts, review results, and revise the activity for the next offering. Course evidence: anonymized artifacts, a brief rubric summary, and a reflective memo documenting what changed and why (systematic inquiry).

Professional learning and staying current with emerging trends in technology and curriculum are responsibilities that many colleges and universities place on faculty and staff. Museum educators can be valuable partners in this work when faculty co-design museum-based learning activities and reflect on student outcomes. As faculty–museum relationships grow, instructors gain new contexts for teaching and inquiry while museums strengthen their educational capacity. Rather than assuming learning is only for students or museumgoers, faculty can engage museum professionals as collaborators who support pedagogical scholarship, reflective practice, and iterative improvement based on course-embedded evidence of student learning.

The opposite can also be true for higher education faculty: museums and their staff can provide rich learning spaces that help instructors design authentic, place-based learning experiences and better understand how these organizations function as educational resources for communities, including PK–12 audiences and lifelong learners. For courses that include teacher preparation, public history, or community engagement, this broader educational mission can be a useful part of the learning goals.

### **Cultural and Social Awareness Growth**

Social awareness and cultural inclusion have become increasingly important issues within the United States and have been integrated into multiple levels of curriculum. In higher education, faculty across disciplines are increasingly expected to engage students in complex questions of identity, representation, and public memory, while also creating learning environments that support inclusion and belonging. “Museums provide authentic, content-rich field experiences [that] extend beyond the traditional school-based” curriculum and strengthen trends and changes in curriculum (Clark et al., 2016, p. 330).

When teaching cultural and social topics, faculty are tasked with exploring a number of challenging issues for students to understand. Sensitivities must be observed on historical, cultural, or ethnic topics in both the classroom and museum environments (Harper & Hendrick, 2017). Topics of race, politics, sex, culture, and other taboo subjects should be approached with caution. The classroom and museum environments provide a ripe opportunity to explore these topics in an academic environment. For higher education courses, structured museum-based prompts (e.g., guided inquiry questions, short analytic writing, or reflective briefs) can help students connect exhibits to course readings and produce assessable artifacts aligned to learning outcomes, while also supporting respectful dialogue.

### **Empathy and Compassion**

Empathy is a characteristic faculty often seek to cultivate in students as part of broader educational goals. Compassion is one that falls well into the institutional responsibility of museums as well. The Center for the Future of Museums has identified empathy as a “key factor” that is or will impact the direction of the institutions that fall under its umbrella, noting that “museums’ inherent strengths position them to be effective empathy engines helping people to understand the other and reinforcing social bonds” (Crow & Bowles, 2018, p. 342). Maintaining an effective approach to the analytical reasoning of displays, exhibits, and items found within the museum provides growth to emotional intelligence that augments the classroom and the professional development of faculty and students alike (Crow & Bowles, 2018). Although not all museums have adopted these new trends on the promotion of social issues in an inclusive way, many museum educators and institutions have now approached the role of a museum as a place that

serves their community (or broader when technology is implemented into their programs) for discussion on challenging contemporary issues (De Los Santos et al., 2018). From a SoTL perspective, faculty can make these outcomes more visible by using course-embedded evidence—such as structured reflections, exhibit analyses, or pre/post prompts—to assess how museum-based learning influences student perspective-taking, reasoning, and engagement.

### The Public Historian and Educator's Future

Museum education as a profession has not universally been viewed as a professional track for traditional educators. This is in part due to a lack of educational focus in most museum practitioners' education. Additionally, practicum, board, or state certifications do not exist for those working in education departments of museums. Professional organizations exist that have published best practices and offer support to those operating in these roles, but measures have been made to move complete emphasis on curation to a shared educational/curatorial balance. For higher education faculty, these trends matter because many undergraduate and graduate programs (e.g., history, art history, museum studies, education, and public administration) prepare students for careers that intersect with museums, public humanities, and community education.

Articulating the role of public history, archivists, curators, and museum guides as educators has been challenging. The collaboration of classroom teachers and museums has helped foster this transition, however. Collaboration between higher education faculty and museums can further support this shift by creating structured learning experiences where students analyze how museums interpret evidence, construct narratives, and communicate to public audiences. Just as schools have embraced progressive curriculums and models, so has the museum. The philosophy of museums has evolved from presenting exhibit space to filling gaps in education, curriculum, professional development, and public education. In a sense, "public history" has become "public education" and has given new meaning to the term "living history" (Luckerhoff & Folk, 2016). For faculty, this creates opportunities to design assignments that treat exhibits as texts—requiring students to evaluate interpretation, audience, ethics, and evidence—while generating course-embedded artifacts that can be assessed and used for SoTL-informed refinement.

### Civic Learning and Public Engagement Outcomes

Museums can support civic learning and public engagement outcomes in higher education when faculty design activities that connect course concepts to public memory, institutional narratives, and community contexts. For example, students can complete an exhibit-based policy/ethics analysis, develop a short interpretive label or audio-guide script for a public audience, or write a reflective brief that connects the exhibit to course readings. These artifacts provide course-embedded evidence faculty can assess (e.g., with a rubric for argumentation, evidence use, and audience awareness) and use to refine instruction through SoTL-informed reflection. These outcomes also align well with the practical teaching strategies outlined earlier (e.g., case memos, comparative exhibit analysis, and community-engaged micro-products), allowing faculty to evaluate how museum-based learning supports both disciplinary thinking and public-facing communication.

### The Way Forward

How technology is used in museums continues to develop just as it does in higher education classrooms. How it is used to augment curriculum is an ongoing project for curriculum and instructional designers, museum educators, and higher education faculty, but through collaborative methods, it has become more intentional and comprehensive. Modifying the idea of what a museum has been in the past and the direction it now takes will likely not look the same a decade from the present. However, cultural inclusion, societal input, and student interaction are here to stay.

For higher education faculty, the next step is to treat museum-based learning not only as enrichment but also as

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pedagogical scholarship by aligning activities to explicit learning outcomes, collecting course-embedded evidence (e.g., annotated analyses, concept maps, memos, performance tasks), and documenting iterative improvements as systematic inquiry within the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL). In practice, this work is strengthened when faculty partner with museum educators to co-design student tasks that fit the course and to clarify what evidence will be collected and assessed. Over time, these collaborations can move from one-time “field trip” thinking toward repeatable instructional design—in which faculty implement a strategy (such as the InStruct applications outlined earlier), review student work, and refine the activity for future course offerings.

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