

New Models for Museums: establishing an online, distance learning, museum studies program with the assistance of staff from the museums and collections at the University of Oklahoma.

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Abstract: This paper discusses the need for new models of museum organization and how online, distance learning, museums studies programs can act as agents of change when they are developed by staff from university museums and collections. They can help create new models of professional practice that will be fluid, dynamic, flexible, responsive and driven by vision, intention, context and theory. Online programs also can prepare a new generation of creative and thoughtful leaders. The Museum Studies Program Online, the University of Oklahoma, is described as a case study. In Oklahoma, solutions are being researched and put into practice by a new crop of professionals who are better trained and equipped to enhance the future of museums. Online museum studies programs are one of the best places to encourage research that challenges existing models, rather than replicating them. A rich learning environment can be created that gives maximum flexibility to the faculty and students and provides multiple modalities and opportunities. The tangible advantages, disadvantages, and best practices of an online program also are discussed. A key to the success of the program is an Program Oversight Committee fo highly trained and experience professional from university museums and collections.

Introduction

What have museums become? What will they become? Where's the leadership? While museums are still part of our social fabric, the concept of a museum is changing rapidly. In addition, many are threatened, some have closed (Gropp 2003, Tirrell 2000). Judging by the financial floundering and miscued management of several top museums, it is clear that many directors and governing bodies are ill equipped to lead their museums into the future (Reist 2003, Williams 2003). As a group, our university museums have had serious problems because the leaders, the staff, and their trustees were unwilling or unable to meet, change, and adapt to a new set of challenges. However, the problems are not limited to university museums as illustrated by the severe cutbacks that have taken place at the Milwaukee Public Museum (Lank & Umhoefer 2005). At the MPM, the director has resigned and over 60 staff has been terminated. Without the ability and desire to create new models, we are in trouble and on the way to becoming more like the relics in our collections. The old models that made museums beloved and important to our society aren't working very well anymore.

Our students recognize the problem as indicated by W. Parker Hathcock III (*in litt.* 06.07.2005), one of my students in the Museum Studies Program Online (MSPO) at the University of Oklahoma:

“...is there any attempt by people in the museum (or other) field(s) to create entirely new models for museums (and other kinds of non-profits) that create better systems of accountability and/or attract people who will be more dynamic and effective? ...I continue to wrestle with the current

model of the museum and the trends I see in the people around them. I have some ideas myself about how we should approach this, and, to be honest, I find this current crisis to be something very exciting. I think we have an opportunity to rethink how we go about setting up and running these institutions.”

I am concerned about creating new and better models for museums. I think the new models will be the result of creating new leaders. This paper discusses the need for new models of museum organizations and how online, distance learning, museums studies programs can act as an agents of change. The MSPO, the University of Oklahoma, is described as a case study. The study proposes that museum training programs must prepare a new generation of creative and thoughtful leaders. In Oklahoma, solutions are being researched and put into practice by a new crop of professionals who are better trained and equipped to enhance the future of museums. Museum studies programs are one of the best places to encourage research that challenges existing models, rather than replicating them. I also discuss the advantages, disadvantages, and best practices of an online program. I used student evaluations and interviews with faculty in forming my discussion in this paper. I also add my own comments as an MSPO professor for the course “Museum Leadership and Management”.

The Characteristics of New Models for Museums

What are the characteristics of a new model for our university museums? To begin my discussion, I quote from a description of “Communicating University Museums: Awareness and Action – University Museums Today” the theme of our 2005 University Museum and Collections (UMAC) Conference, Uppsala, Sweden.

“To meet the future we must convince the world and our university management just how useful the scientific and cultural heritage is ...”

How do we convince the world and our universities about our scientific and cultural importance? To meet the future and to convince our world, we must become more dynamic. The "New Museum" that John Cotton Dana (1999) envisioned is not a static ideal, but an institution in the continual process of reflection, evolution and change. The new models of museums will be dedicated to action. Museums will do more than preserve acts of imagination - they will fuel them. They will incubate changes in society, not just chronicle them. University museums are ideally suited to take on the role of change agents. As change agents, university museums themselves become educational instruments.

Sustaining a culture of change and institutional growth, requires and will lead to distinctly different types of relationships between museums professionals, between professionals and their discipline, and most important, between museums and their communities. It will be necessary for professionals to develop cadres and cohorts that interact and intimately share information and techniques in far more detail than at the usual professional conference. Mentoring needs to be revived. Communities and museums must become integral, mutually beneficial and symbiotic. As museums change, the discipline of museum training must include areas such as ethics, law, and managerial techniques (e.g., how to organize and lead a meeting). Without this training, leaders and managers will waste valuable time with personnel issues, legal concerns, defending the museum’s financial position. Ultimately, they will fail.

As indicated by our thematic description, the key to our success will be through our students: “Our success depends upon making our heritage known, visible, accessible and useful to students...” They recognize the problem. The new museums programs for our students must arouse curiosity and encourage research that challenges existing models and seeks alternative approaches. They also must deal with complexity and real life experiences, be dynamic, flexible, resourceful, and knowledgeable, and create students who are better trained and equipped than their predecessors. The professionals who will lead tomorrow’s museums will need to be resourceful fundraisers, expert managers, brilliant scholars and excellent communicators.

University museums, with their academic collections and community resources, are ideally suited to be the keys to powerful change (Tirrell 2003). This, too, is indicated in our Conference theme: “University museums are actually at a great advantage due to their immediate access to state of the art technology and knowledge in fields such as IT, pedagogy and museum studies.” Museum studies programs, and specifically online programs such as Oklahoma’s are in an ideal situation to take command of developing the new models for museums. Why is this so? What is it that online program can do better than other museum studies programs?

Online, Distance Learning, Museum Studies Programs as Agents of Change

Distance learning in the field of museum studies has been a practice at various universities across the country and abroad, but the efforts of developing distance-learning courses/programs have been isolated. Distance learning is fast becoming a major part of academia but, even at this early stage, it is clear that it has advantages and disadvantages, and that certain fields lend themselves better to online delivery than others. Several universities in the US are embarking on the offering of online courses and even degree programs in museum studies. Perhaps the most significant question with the proliferation of these programs is: Can the universities and the museum community to assess the validity of such efforts? However, we also must ask questions such as:

- How can they be established and what are the requisites for success?
- For what type of students (beginning, advanced) is distance learning most appropriate?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages?
- How can they be evaluated?
- What are the best practices?
- Can they create new models for museums?
- What is their future?
- To what material does/doesn’t it lends itself?

History of the Online Program at OU and Keys to Establishing its Success

Online museum studies programs are one of the best places to encourage research that challenges existing models, rather than replicating them. A rich learning environment can be created that gives maximum flexibility to the faculty and students and provides multiple modalities and opportunities. Online programs also can prepare a new generation of creative and

thoughtful leaders. In Oklahoma, solutions are being researched and put into practice by a new crop of professionals who are better trained and equipped to enhance the future of museums.

The University of Oklahoma (OU) was a prime candidate for developing an online museum studies program. As indicated by Raschke (2003), Oklahoma had a “distributed” system of higher education for decades. Oklahoma developed “correspondence courses” as a form of distance learning before it became fashionable in American higher education. Much of this was due to the rural nature of the state. In addition, soldiers returning from World War II who wanted to improve their education without the need to become campus residents may have increased the demands.

In over 40 years of existence, the OU College of Liberal Studies (CLS) has gained national and international recognition as a leader in the nontraditional degree movement and in continuing, liberal education. Established in 1960, the College was initiated as a program by OU faculty members committed to the high quality programs that would recognize the circumstances and needs of adult learners (College of Liberal Studies, The University of Oklahoma, 2003). By 1967, master’s degrees were offered in liberal studies, and by 1978, OU had created a freestanding College designed specifically for adult, part-time students. It became “...a natural matrix for the evolution of postmodern learning spaces (Raschke 2003). The self-paced curriculum combined independent study, reading and writing assignments, and on-campus, hands-on, seminars and workshops (several weeks each year).

In 1981, the CLS established a Master’s of Liberal Studies (MLS) degree with Museum Emphasis. At the time, many universities were developing some form of museum studies programs in response to needs of the field. However, the CLS theorized that a liberal studies degree with a museum emphasis could target adult learners. The degree followed the basic format of other CLS degrees with specific assignments and projects in the museum field. From 1980-95, the program flourished. Experienced professionals from outside the university were hired to teach the courses. However, the staff of the San Noble Oklahoma Museum on Natural History (SNOMNH, previously known as the Stovall Museum of Science & History) and the OU Museum of Art also participated on an ad hoc basis and served students as their project and thesis directors. Students also toured the museums as part of the on-campus training and used the museums for independent research and projects. The program appealed to many mid-career professionals who had museum jobs and needed a master’s degree to advance in the profession. However, in 1996 and 1997, the program had financial and academic difficulties. With changes in the profession, students no longer had the time required to spend on campus seminars while keeping their jobs. The program retired in 1998 with the possibility for review and restructuring

Planning for an online museum studies program began in 2002-03 with an experienced and highly qualified team of museum professionals from the SNOMNH, the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art (JMA), the Charles M. Russell Center for the Study of Art and the American West, The History of Science Collection, and the Western History Collection. The planners were able to draw upon extensive and up-to-date resources on campus such as a state-of-the-art facility the SNOMNH, and expanded art museum, and additional improvements in campus collections. As with the previous museum studies program, the new online program was seeking a specific niche by targeting adult learners who had jobs in the profession and needed to add to their training and marketability. Dr. Michael Mares, Curator of Mammals and former director of SNOMNH taught the initial course “The World of the Museum” in the fall of 2003.

Of six faculty members, five are from OU museums and collections. The faculty members participate in an ongoing Program Oversight Committee. Thus, staffs of university museums and collections such as Oklahoma's have a strong role in designing, implementing and evaluating the program.

From an initial group of 12 students, there are 64 enrolled in the program. In summary, the keys to establishing the OU program were:

- The OU/CLS had an established distance-learning program.
- Advances in Internet technology made online delivery possible.
- There was a planning and teaching team of experienced museum professionals at the University of Oklahoma.
- Quality resources in museums and collections were available.
- The program identified a consumer niche.
- Distance learning and the Internet combine to create and encourage a matrix of postmodern learning opportunities

Advantages of the Program

There are numerous advantages to an online program that are attractive to the museum professional who has experience in the field. Among them are the following.

- The program is designed specifically for adult, part-time students, who already have museum experience and usually have a job.
- The program is less expensive than a resident program.
- The program is semester-based and relies encouraging on the student's commitment to make progress.
- The students can keep their jobs while participating in the online degree program.
- The students do not have to take time away from their jobs and families.
- Students who are in rural areas, isolated, or face physical challenges can participate.
- Students can apply learning immediately to their museums; make connections between the material and their own lives.
- The students are highly motivated because they have made a substantial commitment in expense and time.
- The tuition, fees, and books are the same as residence programs at OU.

Disadvantages of the Program

By no means is an online program or "wired academy" a perfect solution to creating new museum models and better leaders and managers in the field. The perceived magic of the Internet is not a replacement for real experience with the real magic of items upon which all museums are founded. There are many limitations due to the non-physical contact between faculty and students. Among the problems are:

- There is a lack of face-to-face contact often so stimulating and telling.
- There is difficulty in teaching or learning lab or hands-on courses (e.g., collections care).

- Testing and evaluation is limited but becoming more flexible as educational online technology improves: Students enrolled in the OU/MSPO are graded primarily on the papers that they write as part of their assignments although objective quizzes are now possible.
- Interaction as a group is limited but discussion boards and email exchange by asynchronous design has enhanced accessibility.
- Quality of degree can be questioned. The faculty of the OU/MSPO opinioned that a traditional disciplinary degree in the sciences or arts is likely to be more valuable than an online degree.

Evaluation

Students in the CLS are encouraged to complete an optional online evaluation of their courses. For students enrolled in Online Museum Studies, the evaluation covers 18 reference points. Initial results for the MSPO are encouraging but limited by small sample size of 27% of students (N=8). Overall evaluation of the program was ranked above average and excellent in several points such as critical and independent thinking and organization for non-traditional students. However, other points such as contributions by the instructor and the amount learned were ranked as average or good. The latter are areas for improvements. Anecdotal response from students has been excellent.

I interviewed four of the MSPO professors and add my own comments as professor of the course “Museum Leadership and Management”. All of us are in favor of a more formal evaluation designed specifically for the students and courses of the MSPO. Our primary concern is “How much are the students learning?” However, we also have questions regarding the need for new teaching methods, how we can encourage research, how the experience of the students can be better utilized, and how we can maximize the dynamic of cadre/cohort student interaction. To answer these and other questions, our plan is to design an evaluation program working with professional evaluators. We see the need for front-end surveys of students and faculty and administrators including interviews and online questionnaires. In addition, we will perform formative evaluations of students and summative evaluations of extreme case sampling of students (e.g., advances in the profession and maximum variation sampling of students). Objective assessment of the program has become possible.

Best Practices

The CLS views the Internet as a powerful teaching and learning tool. IT has made possible a form of teaching and learning that heretofore had been impossible. As the Internet technology (IT) advances it also becomes more available. With an immense diversity of content and cultural expression, it’s a real possibility to make the transition from using the Internet as a curriculum supplement to developing entire web-oriented program “with an underlying philosophy of Internet-generated epistemologies” (Nash & Dougherty 1999). To realize this potential, we must get rid of outdated delivery methods in museum studies programs. This will require more than a traditional two dimensional format of the teacher and the taught where information is transferred in linear sequence from one database to another (Nash & Dougherty 1999). There can be no fact-shoveling model of what a museum should be. Too often, we are trapped in what Raschke (2003) refers to as beliefs of “crypto-Ludditism” where we have

convinced ourselves that we have added a real dimension to learning by simply using the Internet as an auxiliary to our training. Worse yet, we can become myopic. In *Flatland*, Abbott (1983) shows how an inhabitant of Spaceland (our own familiar three-dimensional Universe), after explaining in detail the two-dimensional limitations of Flatland, and forcing an inhabitant of the plane to accept the additional (third) dimension, himself falls into a rage when asked to contemplate a fourth dimension. There is a need for us to seek many dimensions and recognize a matrix of differentiated learning practices in the matrix of classroom, teacher, students, and the Internet. As Nash and Dougherty (1999) stress “Don’t put your textbook on the Internet” and de Maret (pers. Comm. 09.26.2005) indicated that we cannot simply move from “brick to click”.

As proposed by Nash & Dougherty (1999), the key to successful online course development is their book *The Diamond Solution*. Briefly, there are four indispensable contributors that make up the Diamond, “...a matrix of differentiated learning practices which overcome the traditional duality of the teacher and the taught, the learner and the one who dispenses learning (Rashke 2003)”. The four collaborative components are the Student, the Faculty Member, the Network Manager, and the Curriculum Web Site Developer, sometimes referred to as “the four doors” (J. Morrison pers. comm. 11.02.2005). In the Diamond, the components can maximize their experience by working together, interacting, communicating, and performing their roles. Students are the real reason for the educational program but are often overlooked in its design. The faculty member is viewed as the flag-bearers of the subject matter – their interaction with the Student is what makes the teaching/learning environment. As they point out, the faculty member should focus just on being a faculty member and scholar who develops the course content, and not designing or technical tinkering with web sites. The Network Manager runs the network – all the technical and network parts of the courses. The Curriculum Web Site Developer is responsible for building the course web site, a person who understands the nuances of how people view information on the Internet. This person is a specialist who understands academic theory, web site theory, and can speak intelligently to the network personnel. They are not responsible for developing curriculum or setting up servers or handling network issues.

The Diamond remains the underpinning of the CLS system. However, CLS has added a Curriculum Coordinator, a fifth facet, who is responsible for assisting the faculty member in organizing and developing content. In addition, CLS has moved its focus toward creating an environment that provides multiple modes and delivery methods. CLS wants its faculty to be highly interactive, establishing a social presence with bearing and respect with the students’ learning styles. CLS also is improving its Learning Management System (LMS). Desire2Learn is a new system that permits faculty and students to communicate in a variety of ways such as discussion boards. It also has improved online grading, upgrades to course websites, and features such as a drop box for assignments.

An online program such as Oklahoma’s has a mixed cadre and cohort of students with a high potential for creative learning. The students can be at the center of course development and learning. The teachers have their own experiences and training. However, the students also bring an extensive assortment of museum training and experiences not found in the typical students in a resident program. The students in a resident program are usually inexperienced and untrained. By contrast, online students can come from all sizes and types of museums located in widely different geographic sites and cultural backgrounds (potentially worldwide) and may have

numerous training or learning experiences (e.g., participation in professional museum organizations), which they can contribute to their program.

There is a lot to be said for experience in the real world of museums – in fact, there is no substitute for it as indicated by my interviews with fellow faculty in the MSPO. In the complex, competitive, changing and often politically charged world of the museum, leadership develops primarily on the job. Museum directors have huge responsibilities and high-risk expectations. The directors must deal effectively with the parent administration, boards, or trustees, often a time consuming, frustrating, and delicate course. The directors also must be showmen, financiers, diplomats, aestheticians, philosophers and master builders. These are demanding roles that can be contradictory and exhausting. In addition, they must solicit cash, cultivate donors, manage the press, and deal with a curatorial staff that likely is made up of specialists with strong opinions and equally strong egos (Auer 2002, Tirrell 2003). By treating the students, as a new group of potential leaders, there is an inflow and mix of new information and ideas – faculty and students can learn from each other.

Therefore, the best practices for an online program must include:

- A high level of faculty/student cohort interaction and a matrix of experiences based on mutual respect and learning styles.
- A focus on curiosity, necessity, and creativity.
- An encouragement of study and research that challenges existing museum models.
- A preparation of new models and alternative approaches that are fluid, dynamic, flexible, and responsive.
- An approach to modeling that is driven by vision, intention, context and theory.
- Five integral components: the Student, the Faculty Member, the Network Manager, the Curriculum Web Site Developer, and the Curriculum Coordinator.
- The power of information technology is maximized by multiple modalities.
- A Program Oversight Committee of museum professionals.

The Next Steps

We can produce new and better leaders with an online museum studies program. We are already seeing the results as several students have indicated the value to their current positions or are able to seek better positions. However well trained and experienced, the new leaders are likely to face the same old difficult problems with the governance of their museums. Administrators, board members, and trustees are not trained or experienced in museums. They are almost always in their positions because of their successes or expertise in an occupation or field other than museums such as business. While this can be helpful in areas such as fundraising, it can be a disaster if they treat the museum as a for-profit enterprise with a dollar-driven budget. How can we increase their educational understanding of museums? Great leaders can ignite change, but they will need help to change the field. Can online courses be agents of change? To improve the leadership in the museums community, the Program Oversight Committee must also address questions such as “Why not provide short, interactive, online courses for administrators, board members, and trustees?” CIS has indicated that such units may be provided as non-credit, low cost, modules on CD-ROMS.

The Program Oversight Committee also is seeking more methods of delivery for museum courses that are difficult to teach in an online format. Training in important skills such as exhibit design and fabrication require a significant amount of hands-on participation with the teacher. For these courses, the Committee is considering a format that includes an element of in-residence experience on campus at the SNOMNH and the JMA. This experience may take the form of an internship or highly concentrated training session.

Summary

Online, distance learning, museums studies programs can act as agents of change. They can help create new models of professional practice that will be fluid, dynamic, flexible, responsive and driven by vision, intention, context and theory. Online programs also can prepare a new generation of creative and thoughtful leaders. In the Museum Studies Program Online at the University of Oklahoma, solutions are being researched and put into practice by a new crop of professionals who are better trained and equipped to enhance the future of museums. Online museum studies programs are one of the best places to encourage research that challenges existing models, rather than replicating them. There are five integral components to building a successful online program: the Student, the Faculty Member, the Network Manager, the Curriculum Coordinator, and the Curriculum Web Site Developer. By their interaction, a high level of faculty/student cohort interaction and a matrix of experiences are possible maximizing the power of the Internet. Key to the success of the program is a Program Oversight Committee of highly trained and experienced museum professionals from university museums and collections.

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