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“Museum in School”: Redesigning a Classic Classroom Project through Technology

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Museum openings, complete with exhibit banners, student docents, brochures, admission tickets, demonstrations, guest books and souvenirs, serve to celebrate completion of a unit study in my K-12 English Language Arts and Social Studies classrooms. This act of working together as a curatorial community to develop exhibits, demonstrations, and storytelling for adult and peer visitors bonds the students as a literate community with the mission of communicating their content and skills to others effectively through their museum school gallery. Students develop critical and analytical reading skills as they research content of the exhibit—say, for example, an E.B. White author study, or an immigration theme. They create actual informative reports, functional writings (museum surveys, quizzes, museum brochures) and persuasive visual formats (posters) as part of the museum experience.

While I provide my students with this opportunity to literally “exhibit” content mastery of their unit topic (i.e., for example, facts about the author E.B. White and his many works, or facts about New York City immigration during the twentieth century), it is awesome to consider how the uses of accessible, student and teacher friendly software and use of free Internet sites have immeasurably enhanced literacy opportunities for students.

The classroom museum as a culminating literacy-laced-unit, celebration with community outreach and feedback, is an exciting, engaging, and memory-making student endeavor. “Literacy laced” means that while the end product of the museum project is a multimedia-visual arts-rich exhibition, there are

numerous oral language spoken, written, published and interactive literacy opportunities (e.g., docent tours, posted signage, informational brochures, feedback forms, maps, read-alouds of exhibit related books). Beyond its inherent magic, collaborative think-tank teaming, and appeal for all learners, the museum project can be infinitely expanded through the use of the Internet, Desktop Publishing, Excel and Microsoft Publisher—the emerging basics of technology available for classrooms.

In this essay, I demonstrate how to begin the process of Museum in School planning guide. After each step, I describe how “tooling” this literacy project with technology can expand the audiences and student engagement with literacy. For each of the stages, I provide two approaches to constructing a classroom museum—with and without computerized technology—and focus on the literacy principles and practices that students learn through this process, including performing, discussing, researching, integrating technology as a tool, and writing for an audience.

Step One: Background Learning and Planning the Museum

Before students work together as a team on transforming their classroom into a gallery, they need to have some idea of what a museum is, why people create museums and why many people enjoy going to museums (not only as part of mandated school trips).

Without Technology. The teacher leads a discussion in which students share their ideas about museums based on past experiences. Sometimes the teacher may deliberately read aloud or focus students’ attention on a non-fiction or fiction book about an actual famous museum, particularly when students do not live near accessible and age-appropriate museums or come from families who do not frequent museums. However, vibrant and captivating as the story of a museum experience is, it remains an abstract concept for some students in rural regions or ones who are economically, socially and linguistically challenged. Hence for students to create their own model of an actual cultural organization not personally experienced represents a challenge; anticipating an adult audience

visiting and learning from exhibits at the museum presents another challenge for the students. However, knowing the audience helps students write, speak, communicate and create the museum experience, and these are key parts of English Language Arts Standards.

With Technology. Now, with access to the Internet, even if some students have never experienced a museum, they can visit as many museums as they want to online. They can view pertinent museums related to their units or themes without leaving their classroom or spending a dime—even if they live in Champagne, Illinois or Broward County, Florida. For example, three museums in New York City that offer online tours and plenty of resources include the Children’s Museum of Manhattan (<http://www.cmom.org/>), the New York Historical Society (<https://www.nyhistory.org/web/>) and the Museum of the City of New York (<http://www.mcny.org/>).

After choosing a museum and locating the URL, the teacher might identify online experiences offered by the museum, e.g., activities or links for the students to be certain to review. Finally the teacher can provide the students with time and opportunity for a directed *cyber visit* to the exhibit.

If a particular class is comprised of students who have learned to conduct online searches and evaluations using a teacher or student designed rubric, the teacher may forego the preliminary listing of potential museums and leave the identification of appropriate museums to the students, making it even more investigatory, critical and analytic reading-centered—and student-owned. Even if the teacher does the preliminary perusal of sites and directs the students to activities, the students will have to engage in a tremendous amount of functional and informational reading and writing as they visit their museums. They need to evaluate how useful the sites they visit are in terms of print information, public domain images and accessibility for demonstrating and sharing specific pages or features of them with an adult or peer small group audience in 8-10 minutes. Most importantly, students experience streaming videos, interactive graphics, potential shifting screens and online interactive/collaborative writing and reading opportunities of a plethora of museums.

Neighborhood and international-museum-going students can expand their explorations of multiple world-class museums from their classroom chairs. In some

respects, the Internet levels the cultural resources inequity with each keystroke of a museum URL. Even urban students who may live near museums (e.g., those who live in cities

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such as Boston, NYC, or Philadelphia) rarely have time or opportunity to visit many accessible local cultural sites unless their families are cultural organization members. But through the use of online sources the cultural appetites and awareness of all students—including those from small towns or rural isolated communities—are immeasurably broadened.

For example, one of my former students from ten years ago stopped me on the street to tell me he had finally seen the San Francisco Exploratorium (<http://www.exploratorium.edu/>) after we toured it online for a Leonardo da Vinci Project. Students from Boise, Idaho, whom I visited during a residency on a Langston Hughes exhibit, were able to access the riches of the Schomburg collection and the Studio Museum of Harlem (<http://www.studiomuseuminharlem.org/>) online, where they also encountered artist Kerry Marshall. They had never heard of either the Studio Museum of Harlem or Kerry Marshall—nor had their teacher before they did the searches and checked out the sites. Online visits are *never* a substitute for experiencing a museum on site, but I would rather have the Louvre Museum (<http://www.louvre.fr/llv/commun/home.jsp?bmLocale=en>) or Tate Collection (<http://www.tate.org.uk/collection/>) online, than wait to raise money to take my class or myself there to research the French Revolution or Ann Boleyn.

Beyond broadening students’ ability to develop a potential laundry list of objects and stories for the theme museum, the fact that the students have been part of an online audience for a variety of distanced and local museums helps them to “expand” their definition of *visitors* to their own museum exhibits.

Step Two: Building the Collection

Without Technology. The teacher has the students review any texts or printed materials or experiences they had

during the study of their unit. From these documents, texts, and experiences, the students compile a list of objects they could use in their exhibit. They decide who would be responsible for getting a particular object and create a timeline plus chart of responsibilities.

With Technology. Students can access the sites they visited, create an excel chart (or registry of objects), and create an excel schedule of roles and responsibilities. The registrar or head curator can maintain online contact with participant students to monitor progress in building the collection. The entries for a collection catalogue can be readily assembled as a word file.

Step Three: Creating the Museum

Without Technology. The students draw their space and develop blueprints to transform the classroom into a gallery. They hand letter all signs, brochures, posters, and directions. They hand fold brochures, post and format them, photocopy brochures, fliers, and feedback forms on the school copier, or if there were additional funds, use a commercial color copier for a nicer looking product on quality card stock or glossier paper.

With Technology. Posters, signs and graphics can be done with MS Publisher or Print Artist. Images that are public domain can be scanned into these documents, as could digital photographs of the museum in progress and the students at work. With a laser printer, sufficient color cartridges and glossy paper, high quality brochures, posters, signs, fliers and other museum announcements can be easily printed in necessary quantities. Even if the school does not have a laser printer and sufficient paper for the printed signs and other museum materials, the prototypes of them are now part of set classroom museum documents, which can be referenced, updated and reviewed by the next year's classes or other peer groups.

If the classroom or school has access to podcast/MP3 recording capacities, the students can record a podcast, interviewing donors of materials to the collection, or detailing through narrative how the exhibit evolved, or interviewing professional adult museum curators. Thanks to the technology, these experts can be from world-class museums that specialize in particular collections, or (over-booked) staff from local museums that cannot visit the school. The MP3 recordings can provide appropriate period music, popular music, or even student-composed music can be wafted through the exhibit.

This technique is actually in place at many cultural institutions to add an aural dimension to the museum experience. If MP3's are not available for the class, students could record museum exhibit tour guides' tapes on audiocassettes, so some classroom museum visitors could do self-guided tours.

Step Four-Working the Museum

Without Technology. Museums have greeters who welcome guests to the museum. Their remarks, although sometimes spontaneous, are generally scripted and practiced before the guests come to the museum. The docents, or tour guides, compose their own scripts so that they have a step-by-step procedural narrative to guide the museum visitors within a 10-15 minute session through the exhibit. They may eventually need to deviate from this script or respond extemporaneously to questions from the guests that were not anticipated, but generally, they do follow this script and rehearse it within the time limit.

The demonstrators or storytellers—those who perform or read from a book related to the exhibit/unit theme—also work from a script, which details the step-by-step procedures in their “make it and take it demonstration” (i.e., mask making for a mythology unit), or provides story reading (i.e., what illustrations to ask questions about, where to pause for the audience to provide ending rhymes or fill in missing words). These scripts are developed by student demonstrators and storytellers and rehearsed prior to the opening, often with other members of the student curatorial community as the audience.

Often, if students focus on their research and informational skills, some of them opt to be journalist documenters of the museum building process. Their reports are included in the brochure or catalog, and sometimes their photographs and reports are part of the exhibit as well.

With Technology. The handwritten work described above can be facilitated, preserved, and transferred to keystroke and document modified change by using the most accessible Microsoft Word documents, digital photography, Power Point Presentations, and Ms. Publisher tools, which are increasingly accessible and familiar to students. Use of KidsSpiration (<http://www.inspiration.com/>) can enhance documentation as well as engage students in using necessary graphic organizers that will enrich their research reporting

capabilities beyond the scope of the museum project. Creating docs, jpegs, Power Points, and other files, also ensures that the teacher and the young curators have records of their achievement, which can be used as a modifiable template for future research and student inspiration.

Step Five: Optional Follow Up

Without Technology. Students may create the guestbook, photos from the museum, and the many scripts (e.g., tour guides and visitor feedback forms) and document the experiences of the event through a beautiful scrapbook or poster commemorating this class curatorial and bonding experience. They might include scenes from it in a school newsletter, write an article for the student newspaper, or write reflective journals about the experience. Artifacts from the collection and the transformed classroom are photographed as well, to keep for posterity or at least for the next class to see and, for some proud students, to take home.

With Technology. If students have learned Dreamweaver, Flash, or Front Page, they can expand the capacity for accessibility of the exhibit for a broad audience of Internet users, or potential school reviewers when they apply for a high school or college.

Conclusion

Museums, with or without technology, offer all students the opportunity to participate in meaningful, memorable learning experiences whose magic may—and often does—last beyond the event and the school year. With technology, that experience can be accessed again and again by students, families and friends, the teacher, and a general audience. Technology, even if it is minimal, can and does offer multiple dimensions to enhance the inherent magic of museums.

Appendix

Resources to Start Cyber-Museum Visits Anytime, Anyplace. Begin your pre-research and pre-selection of sources by visiting:

Resource Central –Museum Resources Worldwide
<<http://www.resourcehelp.com/qsermuseum.htm>>

This comprehensive search engine offers a broad spectrum of links to a number of adult and children themed museums that will definitely address any mandated theme or unit you plan. Check out the San Diego Aerospace Museum for history of military and civil aircraft, or add a museum touch to a Thanksgiving unit

by visiting the Pilgrim Hall Museum-America's Museum of Pilgrim Possessions. If your goal is to infuse community service or teach civic responsibility and volunteerism as part of your social studies unit, visit the American Red Cross link on this site. Mathematics and social studies teachers or any educator who uses cryptograms for teaching puzzle solving, mathematics literacy and higher order thinking skills, will find the National Cryptologic Museum a rich resource.

To help docents design their cyber museum tours, or to quickly show visitors around some museum sites that added to student and teacher knowledge, or influenced the style of the classroom exhibit, visit: **Great Museums: Virtual Tour**, www.greatmuseums.org/virtual_museums.html.

If you have little previous experience in integrating museums as literacy, content and project tool in instruction, take time to visit: **Going to a Museum? Resources for Educators**, <<http://curry.edschool.virginia.edu/it/projects/Museums>>. This comprehensive guide and step-by-step planner is a course itself in the uses of museums as vehicles for student-centered content and investigatory collaborative learning. Even the teacher who is highly expert in museum integration will pick up pointers from it, and middle school and beyond student curators will find it an excellent introductory course.

National Gallery of Art-School Tours: <<http://www.nga.gov/education/school.htm>>

This site is full of grade and age appropriate themes that can be used, it also provides sample questions, teaching materials and models to target curatorial teams. The site has a downloadable guide for its The Art of Romare Bearden exhibit that can be used in your classroom studies as well.

About the Author

Dr. Rose Cherie Reissman (cherie.reissman@yahoo.com) is the President of the New York City Association of Teachers of English. She has done over 100 Classroom Museums in over 63 schools throughout New York City, Florida, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, and North Carolina. This program has been subsidized by grants from Starbucks, Helena Rubinstein, and Morrison Forrester. Dr. Reissman has written books published by ASCD, ISTE, NCTE, and Penguin.