

ONLINE MUSEUMS: A PEDAGOGIC TOOL TO FACILITATE OBJECT-ANALYSIS AND AN ENRICHED DECOLONISED LEARNING EXPERIENCE FOR FASHION DESIGN STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract

Triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic museums closed their doors. An acceleration of online museum databases made available to the public resulted. Furthermore, the death of George Floyd (2020) and ensuing protests inflamed existing debates on the future of the museum and the colonial past of European cultural institutions. Concurrently, the UK Higher Education sector witnessed a rapid shift to blended modes of learning and an urgency to decolonise the curriculum. Online museums have a key role to play here in supporting access to hidden voices and histories, and student projects that expose new perspectives. Yet, an adoption to a hybrid (online and in-person) approach to teaching requires suitable tools for an inspirational and transformative learning experience to be achieved. This research highlights the design of online museum briefs for students studying on an undergraduate fashion design course. The issue of how to facilitate object-based learning in the absence of physical access or touch is addressed here. While the question of how online museum resources can offer an enriched, decolonised learning experience that reveals new meanings and values drove my pedagogic explorations. Approaches which included building resources with students and designing online museum activities will be shared here.

Within this action research project, the first intervention was designing and adapting museum briefs for both on campus and online only modes of study. The second intervention was an online museum and gallery session that I designed and delivered. The online visit introduced students to google arts & culture and various other digital resources. Within the session, we also discussed the museum and colonialism, museum and gallery labels, perspectives and hidden voices and histories. As the online museum and gallery session was recorded, I conducted a retrospective observation and analysis of the session. Secondly, I designed and delivered a follow up reflective session for a sample of student participants who had attended the online museum visit. The session gave students an opportunity to reflect both collectively and individually on their experience of using online museums and galleries. I also conducted a visual analysis of students work completed in the online museum and gallery visits. I did this by identifying specific categories through which to view the work.

This research has unveiled the positives and challenges of using online museum and collections from a student's perspective. The positive aspects of their experience reveal the value of integrating this type of resource in their learning journey – it pushed them out of their comfort zone, introduced new perspectives, and helped them to develop criticality, which are all important in Higher Education. The findings have revealed the challenges students faced such as not knowing where to start, finding limited information on artworks and the difficulty in gauging scale. In response to the findings, I have designed interventions to enhance student's experience when using online museums and collections.

This presentation will be useful for any lecturers who are interested in integrating and utilising online museums and collections in their curriculum as it outlines the action research project conducted and will provide valuable tips and suggestions.

Keywords: Higher Education, blended learning, online teaching tools, object analysis, online museums, decolonisation of the curriculum

1 INTRODUCTION

In March 2020, we witnessed the unprecedented mass closure of public museums and galleries in the UK in response to the Covid 19 pandemic. During this time of restricted access, there was an

acceleration of online museum and collection databases made available to the public. The death of George Floyd in May 2020 and protests that followed ignited existing debates on the future of the museum. The colonial past of European institutions and a demand to decolonise the museum came to the forefront. Decolonisation as described by the Museum Association in 2020.

Is not simply the relocation of a statue or an object; it is a long-term process that seeks to recognise the integral role of empire in museums – from their creation to the present day. Decolonisation requires a reappraisal of our institutions and their history and an effort to address colonial structures and approaches to all areas of museum work. [1]

Work around decolonising the museum and campaigns to repatriate objects have been ongoing for some time, but when a Black Lives Matter protest in Bristol in June 2020 resulted in the toppling of a statue of a 17th century slave trader Edward Colston, this exasperated the need for museums in the UK to make meaningful change and to urgently consider their future and place in modern society.

Similarly, in Higher Education we acknowledge the impact of imperialism and colonisation on systems of knowledge production. Therefore, we are actively working towards decolonising the curriculum. This process is multi layered but one of the ways we are doing this is by broadening the range of perspectives and knowledge that we teach beyond that of the Western Canon of influence which has been dominant for too long.

At the same time, Higher Education institutions moved to online teaching. As educators, we have learnt how to navigate digital technology to be able to deliver a quality learning experience. Teaching approaches and methodologies that worked in a physical environment were redeveloped to be suitable for platforms such as Blackboard collaborate and Microsoft teams.

Prior to the pandemic, object based learning which encouraged students to utilise physical museum and gallery collections yielded some of the most reflective and imaginative work. Motivated by this knowledge, the issue of how object based learning can be delivered in new online learning environments emerged.

Whilst there is lots of existing research into object-based learning, research into online object based learning pedagogy is new and is relevant to our digital age. Although online museums and galleries existed prior to the pandemic never before, has there been such a need to be able to access objects in physically distanced ways.

The ways in which people connect with physical objects has changed with the advance of technology. Through online museums, we can experience objects in new ways through high definition zoom features, detail views and augmented reality that may bring us even closer to an object than ever before. Restrictions on travel because of the global pandemic have emphasised the importance of being able to access material culture digitally. During this time, remote travel through Google Arts & Culture has enabled us to access the collections of museums and galleries across the globe.

Google Arts & Culture (originally called Google Arts project) was founded in 2011. A partnership between Google and 2000 museums it facilitates access to museums and galleries in 80 countries. [2]

Within this phenomenal archive, objects exist within a labyrinth of interconnecting topics and themes. Algorithms and users generate knowledge trails, both of whom are the new curators. Google is the most extensive object encyclopaedia of our time. For over two thousand years, encyclopaedias have existed and have had a key role in containing, organising, and categorising knowledge. According to Britannica Encyclopaedia the word encyclopaedia is derived from the Greek *enkyklios paideia* meaning “general education” [3]. The role and significance of encyclopaedias as a tool for learning cannot be understated especially where access to physical objects is limited. The representation of physical objects as a source of learning is not new. Encyclopaedias, bibliographies, and archival records have long been accepted as a reliable source of information.

Seth Siegelau an American born art dealer, curator, researcher, made significant contributions to textile research through his extensive collection of hand-woven textiles from around the world. Motivated by a desire to record the fascinating history of fabrics and to share this knowledge widely, in 1997 Siegelau released ‘Bibliographica Textilia Historiæ: Towards a General Bibliography on the

history of textiles. [4]. Just as bibliographies such as this enable us to touch, albeit at distance the wonderful collection of physical textiles that Siegelauub collected, Google Arts & Culture can enable us to touch objects in distanced and new ways.

Knowledge like a journey is transitory in a globalised world; research is in continuous motion and the speed at which knowledge is shared is accelerated through the digital. Digital archives provide a vehicle to knowledge paths. As a teaching resource, they are being underutilised in higher education. Travel is both a physical and metaphorical process. Through museum collections and digital archives, we can travel metaphorically and in recent times of restricted travel due to the global pandemic, online collections can enable us to connect with distanced places.

When we encounter museums and collections, we are experiencing an interplay between the tangible and intangible. Tangible are the objects that have physical presence. Intangible is the invisible connections that we draw between objects and knowledge, the narratives and meta narratives that are intertwined in humans' relationship with objects.

Before the development of digital technology, museums have always embodied elements of both the tangible and intangible. Cabinets of curiosity, the precursor to the modern museum reflected the wealth and status of their owners and told stories of the places they had travelled. Human beings and objects are inherently intertwined, we almost always use objects to some extent to understand ourselves and the world around us.

Artist Grayson Perry Artist, trustee of the British Museum, in discussion with Grau reflects on this connection;

Let us think of a place where there is so much stuff that everybody could find themselves in it. Let us think of a place where, if you want to build your own story, your personal story, you can see aspects of yourself reflected in all the artifacts you may encounter. [5, p.46]

The power of objects is their ability to enable humans to explore our own humanity. When we encounter objects, we gaze at them through a lens which has been shaped by our own existence, knowledge, experience, and perspective. Our gaze is further shaped by the curation of objects and prescribed paths that we are presented with in the physical museum or shaped by the invisible curators, the algorithms that we encounter online.

When working with any museum or collection it is imperative that we acknowledge the narrative and metanarratives that are at play. Colonialism and the European museum are inherently intertwined. The foundations of many early European collections were established from the unlawful acquisition of objects driven by the colonial mandate to collect and classify objects from around the world as acknowledged by the Pitt Rivers museum. [6]

Much of the work of museums today is around acknowledging the unfair practices that led to their establishment. Initiatives such as repatriation and collaborative work with source communities mean museums are finally heading towards a brighter future. Despite this, there is still much to untangle and problematic power structures are still at play within the presentation of objects within collections. Procter reflects;

Museums are more than just physical places designed to house collections. Their purpose is to shape identity and memory. They do not and cannot represent complete stories, but the distilled narratives they propose often contain the most treasured and most contested facets of identity, national or otherwise. A museum is a place we can go to find and tell stories about ourselves and others. It is not the only home for knowledge, but it is one that often holds a national curriculum of identity preferring the dominant and mainstream narratives. [7, p.10]

In object-based learning, we cannot aim for conclusive answers but opportunities to share different viewpoints, to stimulate debate and discussion. A museum is an environment where we should ask challenging questions if we are to successfully unearth the hidden voices and histories beyond the mainstream narratives. Like the museum sector, in Higher Education there is an urgency to decolonise the curriculum and to interrogate the perspectives taught. Online museums and collections can offer a tool to begin to address the issue of Eurocentric perspectives, because through them we can assess

museums and collections from all around the world. Through object-based learning that utilises online collections, we can introduce perspectives that we have not had easy access to before. The digital world creates exciting opportunities for new stories to be told as stated by Amit Sood the Director of Google's art institute.

The storytelling can happen two ways: it can happen from users, who just jump on it and tell their own stories, their personal feelings, their emotional relationships, which is good...What I am most interested in is getting curators who have been studying and researching these topics for years and years to embrace new ways of publishing content. [8, p.151]

Through the integration of online museums and collections in the curriculum, we can encourage students to engage in a process of storytelling stimulated by the objects they encounter. With access to such a diverse range of material from across the globe and a diverse student body, there are opportunities for students to discover objects that they feel personally connected to, and that enable them to explore their own background and heritage, whilst sharing their knowledge and experiences with peers. This can lead to a more inclusive and enriching learning environment that extends beyond the Western canon of influence.

Digital innovations in how we access objects are blurring the boundaries between the tangible and intangible. Search capabilities open endless possibilities in terms of discovering links and connections. The algorithm has now taken over the traditional role of curator in shaping our gaze. Augmented-reality experiences are enabling us to touch objects like never before. In 2020 the Metropolitan Museum of Art enabled online visitors to project Zemí Cohoba, an ancient and iconic sculpture that was used in ceremonies by the Taíno people of the Caribbean in their own homes using an iOS device through AR (Augmented Reality) augmented reality. Whilst the sculpture is viewed in 3D in your own home, users could experience narration by a MET curator who explains the background and significance of this cultural object.

The Met also have a tool on their website that enables gamers who play 'Animal Crossing: New Horizons' by Nintendo to include Met artworks in the spaces they create. The Met's entire collection of more than 406,000 open access images can be transported into virtual homes and islands.

In 2022 New York street artist Brian Donnelly, known as Kaws displayed an exhibition entitled 'New Fiction' at the Serpentine Gallery in London whilst simultaneously making the show assessable on the hugely popular game Fortnite and an augmented-reality app, Acute Art.

When reflecting on his experience of creating a virtual exhibition Kaws argues;

There's no comparison when standing in front of a painting or a piece of sculpture. So I was sceptical, thinking about digital versions. But when I started working with Acute, [I realised that] working with them is the same back and forth as when I work with the bronze foundry, or the factory that I make toys in. And the quality they achieve, it seems very real. [9]

Technological advancement is narrowing the gap between the physical and the digital, the tangible and intangible experience. Scale, which has long been accepted as an issue when viewing artworks online is now being addressed by Google Art Projector that enables you to project artworks into your own homes in their real scale in front of you.

The potential for teaching using digital archives is growing with every new advancement. With new ways to interact with objects, we now need to consider what object-based learning means for us today and not be limited by a belief that an encounter with an object is only meaningful if it is embodied physically.

2 METHODOLOGY

A small-scale self-initiated action research project to analyse and evaluate the effectiveness of online museums and galleries when used as a teaching resource in Higher Education was conducted. The objective was to find out if a sample of first year womenswear design students had a positive experience of using online museums and galleries in a five-week unit entitled '*Introduction to Womenswear*' that focused on developing research, concept development and visual analysis skills.

'Introduction to Womenswear' is the first unit that year one undergraduate fashion design womenswear students undertake when joining the course. In this unit they are taught how to conduct primary and secondary research and are introduced to an extensive variety of sources. From the research that they obtain, students are expected to develop a concept, which they then work with in their proceeding unit.

One of the key research sources that the students are introduced to are museum and galleries. Therefore, a series of visits are built into the unit to provide an opportunity for students to gather research and develop visual and object analysis skills in a museum and gallery setting.

In the past, the museum and gallery visits have been physical but due to the global pandemic they had to move online when museums and galleries were temporarily closed and when students were studying remotely due to pandemic lockdowns. As a result of this change in 2020 the museum briefs were adapted to be suitable for an online only mode of study.

In 2021 when most students returned to a blended mode of study, there was still a proportion of international students studying remotely unable to travel to the UK. Therefore, in response to this situation museum briefs were redeveloped again so that they were suitable for both physical and online museum and gallery settings.

Positive outcomes in student's visual work were observed in 2020 when all students had visited museums and galleries remotely online, with some tutors regarding the work created from the online visits as more focused and extensive than in previous years. This feedback suggested the positive potential of online visits and led to us to continue to integrate at least one online museum and gallery visit for all students regardless of their study status.

The first intervention in this action research study was the design and delivery of the online museum visit that a cohort of first year fashion design students attended in Autumn 2021. The online session hosted on Blackboard Collaborate introduced students to Google Arts & Culture and its various search and navigation tools along with a selection of other digital resources. The session aimed to introduce students to online museum and galleries and to inspire them in terms of how they could use this research source to develop their own concepts.

The online session began with an introduction into the following topics; museums and colonialism, museum and gallery labels, curator perspectives, hidden voices, and histories. This was important because we wanted to encourage students to be critical in their approach to museums and collections with an awareness of current debates.

Being able to access museums and galleries all over the world offers an exciting opportunity to bring in a wider range of voices and perspectives beyond those generated by the western canon, so keen to build on this, a decolonising objective was built into the session through an activity where students created a shared resource of recommendations for museums and galleries in their countries of origin.

Students were asked in advance of the session to prepare one-three recommendations and to obtain one visual image to represent each of their recommendations. There was no stipulation that the museum or gallery that they selected needed to have an online collection although many of them did.

Within the session, students were asked to populate a Padlet with their recommendations and following this, they were then invited to turn their mic on to share their recommendations verbally with the group.

Three students volunteered to share their thoughts.

Student A discussed an exhibition that they had visited entitled '*Thought and method*' by Beijing based artist and printmaker Xu Bing at Ullens Centre for Contemporary Art in China. In their own words, they explained that the exhibition was inspired by Cultural Revolution, Chan Buddhism, and the relationship between meaning and words.

Student B discussed the Yumin Museum of Art, an art museum located on Jeju Island, the southern island of South Korea. This student focused on the architecture of the museum and how it connected to the environment around it.

Student C discussed Auckland Art Gallery (Toi O Tamaki) in New Zealand. They had selected this gallery, which features the Māori portraits by Gottfried Landauer. In their own words, they stated that the gallery celebrates the work of Murray and Pacific Islanders. They liked it because it highlights “the contrasts and the interactions between the colonial past of New Zealand and vision for the future of New Zealand.” [10]

Through this activity, students had introduced a diverse range of cultural and historical themes, which could have been expanded upon in further discussion-based activities as a group or within their own work. This illustrates the potential of online museum and gallery session to inspire and generate critical, historical, and cultural conversations. Students were introduced to an extensive range of museums and galleries all over the world that they would not have otherwise known about. By tapping into the students’ knowledge from their own lived experience, all students were able to learn from one another.

Within the session, students were introduced the Radio Garden App, where it is possible to live stream radio stations from around the world. Students were invited to suggest countries or cities that were searched for, and stations found in those places were played live in the session including stations in Cuba, South Korea, China, and Jamaica. In the unit, we ask students to be inspired by smell and sound so considered this activity to be relevant to their learning journey. Like the shared museum and gallery resource, this activity enabled a positive opportunity to highlight and celebrate the diversity of the cohort and the individual experiences of the students.

To prepare students for the brief that they had to complete, Google Arts & Culture and its features such as the world map, exploring by time, hidden details, culture search, zoom and street view were introduced to the students.

Students were then set the brief to complete for self-directed study. The brief required them to select an online museum or gallery of their choice and then select objects or artworks from that collection to use as inspiration in a series of tasks focused on shape. We suggested that they could select a museum or gallery from the shared resource and investigate if it had online resources or they could find an online museum or gallery through Google Arts & Culture.

The students were asked to find ten works in an online collection that could be art, objects or garments that related to a given word which they were required to use as a starting point for their project. Words included: new, out difference between green and transition.

For each work they selected in a collection, students were asked to generate a series of quick sketches in different media, exploring and recording shape. They were asked to consider how they could simplify the drawing, consider the negative space and to focus on volume and mass as opposed to detail. They were also asked to annotate contextual information about the work and to document materials, creator, and country of origin. They were asked to present their findings across three sketchbook pages for submission.

3 RESULTS

A visual analysis of a sample of students work generated was completed to identify common strengths and weaknesses in the work produced. From the sample of work analysed most students demonstrated very good engagement with the brief and attempted to answer most elements. Most students developed their own personal responses to the objects and artworks and shape was well analysed. Some students included annotation on materials and some students included contextual annotations although this area could have been more extensive.

To obtain students perspective on their experience of the online museum and gallery visit, a follow up interactive session entitled ‘Reflective session on online museums and galleries’ was delivered. A

sample of student participants were invited to the session with the aim to gain their perspective on this topic.

The reflective session aims were:

- For students to share visual work created in the online museum visit
- To generate discussion on students' personal experience of using museums and galleries online
- To give students an opportunity to reflect and make suggestions for how we as lecturers can enhance their experience of using museums and galleries online

The reflective session began with information about the research study, followed by a recap of the previous online museum and gallery session and briefs that the students had completed.

Following this we screen shared a Padlet that we had asked the students to prepopulate with three sketchbook pages they had produced in response to the brief.

One by one, each student discussed the work that they had published on the Padlet and were prompted in their discussion by questions, which were generated in response to their comments.

Next students did a peer-peer activity, which asked them to identify the positives and challenges of using online museums and galleries. They were also asked to add their reflections to whiteboards during the session.

The reflective session was recorded and then used for retrospective observation and analysis. The findings revealed both the positives and challenges students faced when using online museums and galleries in their research process. Many of the positives that students highlighted centred on accessibility.

- Museums being free
- Being able to revisit things
- Being able to access more variety
- Being able to access museums around the world

Students highlighted that the experience had 'pushed them out of their comfort zone.' They valued being able to see objects and artworks in their country of origin rather than being presented with them from a British perspective.

Students discussed the challenges they faced when using online museum and gallery resources. These included; understanding scale, quality of experience, not having an opportunity to discuss objects with peers or to gain different perspectives.

Students highlighted that the online museum or gallery collections did not always provide enough information so they would have liked to have had tools for further lines of enquiry that extend beyond the scope of online museum and gallery resources.

As part of the study three tailored questions were designed and included within the year one cohort's end of unit survey. From the students that responded;

85% of students agreed or strongly agreed that the online museum and gallery visits helped them to think more deeply about their research and to develop their concept.

70% of students agreed or strongly agreed that the online museum visit where we built a shared resource gave them an opportunity to connect with their own background and heritage.

95% of students agreed that they understood how to use Google Arts & Culture following the tutor's demonstration of its search tools and features.

The positive aspects of the student's experience reveal the value of integrating this type of resource in their learning journey – it pushed them out of their comfort zone, introduced new perspectives, and helped them to develop criticality, which are all important in Higher Education.

The findings revealed the challenges students faced such as not knowing where to start, finding limited information on artworks and the difficulty in gauging scale, detail and being able to see artworks from different angles.

Students requested more resources, methods for searching, opportunities for peer work and for a drawing class using images found in online museums and galleries and more integration with other resources.

This information has enabled us to strategise how to 'enhance' students' learning experience moving forwards.

4 CONCLUSIONS

In response to the study findings interventions have been developed to enhance students' experience of using online museums and collections. Quick interventions include opportunities for Q&As on the topic within sessions and resource development such as a tip sheet to support students in using online museum and galleries independently. In the medium term a teaching toolkit to support lecturers who are delivering online museum and gallery visits is being developed. In the long-term initiating collaborations between course teams and our own UAL (University of the Arts London) archive and special collection department to develop teaching and learning activities, which span across both online and physical collections.

The findings of the study revealed a need for more peer-to-peer opportunities to be built within activities that utilise online collections. It is important to facilitate discussion work around objects so that students can share their personal responses to the objects or artworks they are analysing with a peer or in small groups. By working together students can build knowledge together which can lead to new understandings of objects. Another suggested peer-to-peer learning activity would require students in small groups to curate a Padlet exhibition of images of objects and artefacts that they have located online. Utilising multiple museums from across the world the images curated could lead to new stories being told.

Another idea is for students to present an object or artefact that they have found, describing what they know and do not know about the object with peers then helping to build meaning by adding their own perspectives and ideas. Each student could be given a different online museum or collection to work from, ensuring that these spanned the globe.

Combining online and physical collections resources is another exciting approach to explore. For example, developing an activity where students must find an object in an online museum and then to discover a related object in a physical museum to illustrate a concept. A slight variation on this would be to ask students to find an object in an online museum or gallery and to then find three physical objects in their personal space to draw from and inspire new lines of enquiry.

The shared resource building on Padlet was a successful element of the study with students responding very positively to the opportunity to feature their own personal recommendations for museums and galleries in their country of origin. An extension of this activity would be for students to break off in pairs to discuss their recommendations in more depth.

The teaching toolkit is a longer-term goal. A toolkit would be useful for any lecturers who are interested in utilising online museums and collections in their teaching practice. The toolkit will include key findings from the research study along with helpful links and suggestions for briefs, lessons, and activities that teachers could try out with their students. Sharing the toolkit will offer opportunities for teachers to put these findings into practice, which in turn offers new opportunities to measure the effectiveness of these suggestions in this ongoing research project.

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