



Literacy Lives at the Virtual Museum

SUMMARY

The Internet and the availability of free and low-cost desktop publishing software have enhanced literacy opportunities for students by giving them access to museums around the world whose exhibits they can replicate in the classroom. However, even without access to technology, educators can help middle-level students create a classroom museum that will enhance literacy skills for current and future classes.

Museum openings, with exhibit banners, student docents, brochures, admission tickets, demonstrations, guest books and souvenirs serve to celebrate completion of a unit study in my middle-level English language arts and social studies classrooms. This act of working together as curators to develop exhibits, demonstrations, and storytelling builds a literacy community. Students develop multiple reading skills as they research content of the exhibit — for example, a Karen Hesse author study, or a rites of passage theme. They create actual informative reports, functional writings (museum surveys, quizzes, museum brochures) and persuasive visual formats (posters).

While I provide my students with this opportunity to literally “exhibit” content mastery of their unit topic — for example, facts about the author Christopher Paul Curtis or facts about New York City immigration — using accessible, student- and teacher-friendly software and use of free Internet sites have enhanced literacy opportunities for students.

The classroom museum as a closing celebration with community outreach is a memory-making student endeavor. Although the product of the museum project is a multimedia, visual arts-rich exhibition, there are oral language spoken, written, published and interactive literacy opportunities (e.g., docent tours, informational brochures, maps, and readings of exhibit-related books). Beyond think-tank teaming, the museum project can

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be expanded through the use of the Internet, desktop publishing, Excel and Microsoft Publisher — the emerging basics of classroom technology.

Designing a Middle-Level Literacy Classroom Museum — Without and With Technology

This vehicle is grounded in the research of Howard Garner (2004), Heidi Hayes Jacobs (1997), Linda D’Acquisto (2006), Ralph Fletcher (www.ralphfletcher.com) and Carol Hurst (www.carolhurst.com). While I started this project based on my personal museum-going as a child, I was not aware of Gardner’s advocacy of the “ways in which the strengths of a museum atmosphere [fosters] apprenticeship learning ...[content] structure, rigor and discipline” (2003).

In addition, Gardner notes “science museums and children’s museums have become the loci for exhibitions, activities and role models that do engage” (2002). Engaged museum community members — student curators, documenters, docents, exhibit builders, poster designers, brochure authors and others — affirm the efficacy of the middle-level curriculum maps developed

under the leadership of Heidi Hayes Jacobs in which six weeks of world communities unit study culminates in a museum experience with multiple literacy products that can be assessed by teacher-developed rubrics. Linda D’Acquisto made an important contribution to the field with her Learning on Display book that includes detailed guidelines for the development of the museum learning on display vehicle as an assessment of teacher literacy learning genre, text, and content objectives with built-in student peer literacy skills and content mastery assessments plus authentic adult and peer feedback (2006). Carol Hurst’s seminal work in literacy includes a downloadable chapter — Living History Museum — which is part of her work with Rebecca Otis on integrating U.S. history with literature. This chapter details spoken, written, responsive, critical, and analytic ways in which research of U.S. history content at the middle level can be dovetailed with literacy skills as part of students “becoming”/impersonating historic characters in a “living history museum.” In his online “Tips for Teachers,” Ralph Fletcher also suggests that students write about artifacts.

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Over the three decades and ongoing of my field research using the classroom museum vehicle as a frame for literacy learning, student scores have gone up on standardized social studies vocabulary questions, document-based (illustration, artifact and diagram-referenced) questions and timeline questions.

Within the last five years, classes in which I have explicitly developed document-based questions using two artifacts from the museum displays have done significantly better than peer classes that did not have the museum experience as part of their program. This would indicate that their authentic study of artifacts, illustrations, and diagrams as part of the museum experience improves these test-mandated skills.

Step One: Plan the Museum

Students 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 school trips. This can be accomplished with and without the use of technology.

Without Technology. Lead a discussion in which students share their ideas about museums based on past experiences. 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 museums or come from museum-going families. For students to create their own model of an actual cultural organization not personally experienced represents a challenge; anticipating an adult audience visiting classroom exhibits at the museum presents another challenge. Anticipating family and local community as audience helps students write, speak, communicate and create classroom museums. Classroom museums authenticate English language arts standards.

With Technology. Through access to the Internet, students can visit as many museums as they want to online. They can view museums related to their units, without leaving their classroom or spending a dime. Three museums in New York City that offer online tours and plenty of resources include the Children's Museum of Manhattan (www.cmom.org/), the New York Historical Society (www.nyhistory.org/web/) and the Museum of the City of New York (www.mcny.org/).

Identify online experiences offered by the museum, activities or links for the students to review. Provide the students with time and opportunity for a directed cybervisit to the exhibit.

If a particular class comprises students who have learned to conduct online searches and evaluations using a

teacher-designed or student-designed rubric, 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 site activities, 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 are in terms of print information, public domain images and accessibility for demonstrating and sharing specific features of them with an adult or peer small group audience in 8 to 10 minutes. Students experience streaming videos, interactive graphics, shifting screens and online interactive/collaborative writing and reading opportunities offered by many museums.

Neighborhood and international museum-going students can expand their explorations of multiple world-class museums from their classroom. The Internet levels the cultural resources inequity through museum URLs. Urban students who may live near museums rarely have time to visit many accessible local cultural sites unless their families are museum-goers. Through the use of online sources the cultural awareness of all students — including those from small towns or rural isolated communities — is broadened.

One of my former students from 10 years ago stopped me on the street to tell me he had finally seen the San Francisco Exploratorium (www.exploratorium.edu/) after we toured it online for a Leonardo da Vinci Project. Students from Syracuse, whom I visited during a residency on a Langston Hughes exhibit, were able to access the riches of the Schomberg collection and the Studio Museum of Harlem (www.studiomuseuminharlem.org/) online, where they also encountered artist Kerry Marshall. They had never heard of either the museum or Marshall before they did the searches and checked out the sites. As a teacher, I would rather have the Louvre museum (www.louvre.fr/llv/commun/home.jsp?bmLocale=en) or Tate Collection (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-descriptive narratives for the unit museum, the fact that the students have been part of an online audience for a variety of distanced and local museums “expands” their definition of visitors to their classroom museum.

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Step Two: Building the Collection

Without Technology. Have the students review unit texts, printed materials or experiences, then ask them to compile a list of objects for their exhibit. They chart who would be responsible for getting a particular object and create a timeline for the museum.

With Technology. Students can access the sites they visited, create an Excel chart (or registry of objects), and an Excel schedule of roles and responsibilities. The registrar can maintain online contact with students to monitor progress in building the collection. Entries for a collection catalog can be assembled as a Word file.

Step Three: Creating the Museum

Without Technology. Students draw their space and develop maps to transform the classroom into a gallery. They hand-letter all signs, brochures, posters, and directions. They fold, post, and photocopy brochures, fliers, and feedback forms on the school copier or use an outside color copier if funds are available.

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. 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. If the school does not have a laser printer and sufficient paper for the printed signs and other museum materials, the prototypes become part of set classroom museum documents to reference next year.

With access to podcast/MP3 recording capacities, students can record a podcast, interviewing collection donors, chronicling exhibit history, or interviewing adult curators. These experts can be from world-class museums that specialize in particular collections, or distanced museums. MP3 recordings can provide appropriate period, popular, or student-composed music to be wafted through the exhibit. This actual museum technique adds an aural dimension to the museum experience. Students can record museum exhibit tour guides' tapes on audio-cassettes, so museum visitors can do self-guided tours.

Step Four-Working the Museum

Without Technology. Museums have greeters who welcome guests to the museum. Their remarks are scripted and practiced. The student docents, or tour guides, compose their own scripts so they have step-by-step procedural narratives to guide the museum visitors through the exhibit within 10 to 15 minutes. They may need to deviate from this script to respond to questions from the guests.

The demonstrators or storytellers also work from a script, which details the step-by-step procedures in their “make-it-and-take-it demonstration” (i.e., Tiffany glass design using plastic tiles), or related print book 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.

Some students opt to be journalist documenters of the museum-building process. Their reports are included in the brochure or catalog or as part of the exhibit.

With Technology. The material above can be facilitated, preserved, and transferred by using the most accessible Microsoft Word documents,

digital photography, PowerPoint presentations, and Ms. Publisher tools, which are increasingly accessible and familiar to students. Use of KidsSpiration (www.inspiration.com/) can enhance documentation as well as engage students in using necessary graphic organizers that will enrich their research reporting capabilities.

Creating docs, JPEGs, PowerPoints, and other files ensures that the teacher and the young curators have documents that can be used as a modifiable template for future students.

Step Five: Optional Followup

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. They may detail it in a school newsletter, write an article for the student newspaper, or keep a reflective journal. Artifacts from the collection can be photographed for the next class.

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 admissions when they apply for a high school or college.

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Conclusion

Museums in the classroom, with or without technology, offer middle-level students the opportunity to participate in authentic, multiple audience-validating literacy experiences whose magic will linger. With technology, that experience can be accessed again by students, families, the teacher, and general audiences. Technology does offer multiple dimensions to enhance the literacy validity magic of museums.

RESOURCES:

Resource Central — Museum Resources Worldwide

www.resourcehelp.com/qsermuseum.htm

This search engine offers links to a number of themed museums that will correlate to mandated curricula. Check out the San Diego Aerospace Museum for the history of military and civil aircraft. To infuse community service or teach civic responsibility, visit the American Red Cross link on this site. If you use cryptograms to teach puzzle solving, mathematics literacy and higher order thinking skills, you will find the National Cryptologic Museum a rich resource.

Great Museums: Virtual Tour

www.greatmuseums.org/virtual_museums.html

To help docents design museum tours or to show visitors around relevant sites.

Going to a Museum?

Resources for Educators

www.fraziermuseum.org/pdf/educationalresource2.pdf

This guide and step-by-step planner is a course itself in the use of museums for content and investigatory collaborative learning. Middle-level student curators will find it an excellent resource.

National Gallery of Art School Tours

www.nga.gov/education/school.htm

This site has grade- and age-appropriate topics for your unit museum. It has sample questions, teaching materials and models, plus templates for student-centered feedback forms that students can modify. Among themes explored are: weather in art, portraits and personalities, global awareness, and lateral problem-solving. The site has a downloadable guide for its The Art of Romare Bearden (2003) exhibit.

FOR FURTHER PRINT RESOURCES AND SUPPORT:

D'Acquisto, Linda. (2006). *Learning on Display*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

Fletcher, Ralph.
www.ralphfletcher.com

Gardner, Howard. (2004). *The Unschooled Mind*. New York: Basic Books

Hayes Jacobs, Heidi. (1997). *Mapping the Big Picture: Integrating Curriculum and Assessment*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

Hurst, Carol.
www.carolhurst.com