

**Beyond Conversations:  
Collaborations Between the Academy and the Museum  
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*“We are each other’s harvest”  
Gwendolyn Brooks*

Cultural institutions of all kinds are coming together to produce innovative partnerships that emphasize education, community engagement and social responsibility. Museums are very much a part of this endeavor recognizing that “collaboration is some of the most important work of democracy, especially in making resources available to public education.”<sup>1</sup> Still, collaborating is hard and there are many museums, particularly small museums, which stand on the outskirts of this initiative and are hesitant of letting in the various voices of an external chorus. The reasons for this are complex but one way that museums can enter into collaborative work is to connect with local colleges and universities, who are themselves embracing interdisciplinary collaboration. The objective of my fellowship was to explore the state of museum/academy partnerships and propose additional ideas that would allow these two institutions to more fully realize the potential of each other’s harvest.

My research revealed two *internal collaborations* between museums and the academy that can serve to break down barriers of expertise and allow for more innovative programming: *dual focus internships* and the *extended classroom*. Dual focus internships require students to complete training in museum practice in addition to independent research.<sup>2</sup> The dual focus promotes crossover between *practice* and *scholarship*. An overlooked benefit of dual focus programs is the usefulness it has in allowing students to become better collaborators. As collaborations become more important, dual focus internships have a role to play in increasing interdisciplinary dialogue and in training future museum professionals how to talk the talk of both practice and scholarship.

Similarly, the use of the museum as an *extended classroom* has the potential to lessen the differences between the public humanities and academia. Using museums as a classroom is popular in museum studies and public history programs. For example, many of these courses have on-site visits. Yet departments without a public focus can also benefit from an *extended classroom* inside a museum. Traditional history departments are devoted to research and writing and do not require or offer courses related to public history. Yet increased interaction with local museums and historical societies can yield new scholarship in addition to giving students the opportunity to handle and be challenged by primary source documents. For example, many scholars and museum educators note the importance of local stories in teaching. Archivists and curators can prepare project lists that would provide undergraduate advisors and students with possible thesis topics, opening a world of subject matter that needs attention, especially in regard to local history.

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Petner, as quoted in *Museum as Catalyst for Interdisciplinary Collaboration: Beginning a Conversation* Museum Loan Network Cambridge: 2002, 16. Can be viewed online: <http://amps-tools.mit.edu/mln/cswm/mac/pdf/macfull.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> In order to come to a better understanding of internship programs, a survey was sent to 50 internship coordinators. Phone interviews were also used.

Although the concept of the extended classroom is popular in museum studies and public history programs and can easily be utilized in related, albeit more academic, programs, it should be implemented within a variety of departments. For example, Mary Theresa Seig, an English professor at Ball State University, implemented the *Opening Doors Initiative* (ODI) at Conner Prairie (CP), a Midwest living history museum which sees approximately 300,000 visitors a year. The ODI program analyzed how interpreters talked to visitors in order to improve visitor experience.<sup>3</sup> Done as one of Seig's courses, the linguistic analysis helped CP improve their interpretive program and act as a field school for college English majors which usually do not see a lot of field work. The extended classroom concept can be used as a talking point between the museum and the academy that can lead to exciting collaborations with various departments, from art, chemistry, and political science to public interest law and business management. Choosing departments perceived as non-related to museum work will result in innovative thinking, layered with multiple perspectives.

The idea of the *extended classroom* can also mean bringing the museum into the academy. Museum staff can become consultants, or field advisors, to departments trying to interweave a public component into traditional academic programs. Perhaps this expands the role of museum educators to not only educate in terms of teacher and curriculum, but also in terms of the museum discipline. Along the same lines, museums could offer workshops to academic historians with little or no knowledge about the public humanities field, something that would also benefit their students.

Likewise, strong relationships with universities can keep museum staff updated on the best scholarship. Many partnerships already exist which utilize the resources of both museums and the academy to uncover and present minority histories and bring new scholarship to the public. Similar to workshops for academics at museums, universities could hold workshops for museum professionals with the goal of updating them on new scholarship. Even more helpful would be similar workshops hosted by universities to help train volunteer and paid docents who are often frontline staff at museums and the least trained. Docent training is an area of concern at museums and it is difficult to train docents to meet the standards of contemporary museum education.

Internal collaborations between the academy and museum are important, but they should be used as building blocks to *external collaborations* which involve the community. *External collaborations* based on community engagement and public education are becoming popular, although there is a large segment of small local museums being left out of this cornucopia of creativity. Universities can help small museums get involved in this important process by providing – sometimes the vision itself – but mostly the resources and bodies that could make community based projects happen.

This brings me to another important point: museums provide universities with localized access to teachers which can result in exceptional advances in education. In their development of a new website, *Citizens All: African-Americans in Connecticut, 1700-1850*, the Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Abolition and Resistance at Yale University looked to museum educators in local museums and historical societies to organize and host focus groups. I became very much involved in

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<sup>3</sup> For more information, see: <http://www.bsu.edu/sh/article/0,1371,17263-3455-52726,00.html>.

this process by organizing a focus group which brought teachers from the local high school to Bush-Holley Historic Site to examine the website. This led to a more innovative and intense collaboration between the local high school, Bush-Holley Historic Site and the GLC which resulted in an intensive summer school on slavery and citizenship. This three-week course, which met at Bush-Holley Historic Site, challenged ten high school students to explore the implications of slavery through field trips, guest lecturers and an independent project. Most importantly, the students met at Bush-Holley Historic Site, which emphasized the role of local organizations in quality education while simultaneously giving scholars at a major university a chance to reach beyond their ivy walls.

Two factors will help make internal and external collaborations successful: *collaboration training* and *institutionalized partnerships*. Students in all disciplines – from museum studies to art history to political science and the law – need to be taught how to visualize, implement, and maintain collaborations through innovative field schools and mock projects. A seminar which is based on a mock collaboration activity could train future collaborators. Students could be assigned different roles from local senator to professor to a member of a minority church; each student could be required to interview a representative of their assigned role and come back to the table to form a collaboration. Once various perspectives are better understood, it is easier to move into action based programming.

Lastly, from internal to external collaborations to appropriate partnership training, collaborations between museums and the academy (not to mention the community) need to become a *priority*. Many institutions view collaborations as extraneous to internal programming. Refocusing mission statements to include collaborative projects with colleges/universities will further the commitment by museums to embrace community outreach and force all of us in the profession to fully realize the democratic potentials of working together. Essentially, collaborations need to become *institutionalized*. Although this term garners a sense of sterility, I think it is appropriate. Collaborations need to be *written into* mission statements, strategic and interpretive plans, and job descriptions. Writing collaborations and community engagement into our professions will elevate their importance and help us all break down the barriers between disciplines and professionals and the general public. This will allow collaborations to flourish and us all the chance to experience what Stephen E. Weil calls “the magic by which two plus two can make five.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> As quoted in *Museum as Catalyst for Interdisciplinary Collaboration: Beginning a Conversation* Museum Loan Network Cambridge: 2002.