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NEW *DIRECTIONS: Examining the Past,
Creating the Future.*

Wikispaces: Technology, Textiles, and Public Engagement

Blaire O. Gagnon

INTRODUCTION

The current environment for expanding access to collections through digital engagement is exciting. “This technological shift has opened up new opportunities for the public to participate in collections and archives, not only as information consumers, but also as contributors and lay curators, which is a shift toward ‘community informatics’, ‘participatory archives’, and ‘virtual museums’” (Gubrium and Harper 2013, 169). Yet, with the promise of expanded access due to improved technologies, comes anxiety related to such issues as cost, skill development, and critique of current practices. The sheer number of available opportunities for expanding access, even among open-source or free technologies, can lead to inertia or a belief that digitization is “the magic bullet” that will solve all of an institution’s problems, such as a threat of irrelevancy if they do not increase their audience, membership or volunteers (RHODI White Paper 2013, 4). University-based collections must also address the digitization trend but they may have, perhaps, different challenges because 1) their faculty and staff may focus on teaching, service, and publication in ways that do not directly support or integrate their collections; or 2) the majority of their collection/object related projects are turned inward, through such work as student papers. On the other hand, reconsidering students, of all levels, as participants in the construction of a digital archive creates an opportunity to develop a sustainable public engagement project that can contribute to meeting this challenge.

This paper presents the development of a public online wiki repository of undergraduate object-based research and places this project within the greater trend to use technology as a pedagogical tool and to expand audiences and their engagement with collections. A wiki is a website that encourages collaboration because it can be edited and commented on by a multitude of users depending on the site’s settings. I will begin by briefly discussing my project in relation to the democratization of participation and collections. Next, I will introduce you to the wiki project as it has developed in two Honors section of my course TMD 224: Culture, Dress and Appearance. I invite you to access the public site, www.uritextilesandapparel.wikispaces.com, as you read this paper and explore a bit as we move along. Lastly, I will outline the benefits and challenges of this project as a pedagogical and public engagement tool.

DEMOCRATIZATION OF PARTICIPATION: COLLECTIONS IN GLOBAL NETWORKS

I align this project with trends that seek to democratize participation and access to objects and that “conceptualize museum collections within networks” (Cameron 2008, 229). Archives and those that create them exist within larger hegemonic systems that have privileged those with power and influence in society. Objects, within a museum context, have, for too long, been portrayed as matters of fact, which is made tangible “through materiality (the inscribed objective nature of an object based on its material form and links to locations, events and people), museum significance and classification” (Cameron 2008, 233, Latour 2005). Democratization of participation advocates for the encouragement of non-professionals, such as students, to contribute both objects and interpretive meanings. By broadening access through participation, museum collections become entangled in multiple and potentially competing communities of practice. Wiki technology can facilitate the embedding of objects

in global networks of significance, which can contrast sharply with museum significance. For example, the *Reconceptualizing Heritage Collections* project, undertaken by the Australian Research Council, sought to explore object-orientated democracy through a collection wiki and discussions in real time centered on two politically charged objects, a Palestinian thob abu qutbeh (wedding dress) and a British Mandate Coin (Cameron 2008). The participants included curators in Australia, Ramallah, Palestine, and Israel and Palestinian Australian people. Multiple and competing discourses arose regarding the objects and their meanings within the collection wiki. In addition, the future publication of the wiki is seen as problematic because of the tension between “an older idea of the political as part of a dominant museum culture, and new ideas of the political and governance as emergent” (Cameron 2008, 235). Similar tensions have arisen in relation to the wiki discussed in this paper. While engaging students in object-based research and using a wiki format to produce texts can be understood as meeting the pedagogical mission of a course, publishing student work, particularly undergraduate work based on objects held in a university collection, has been seen as problematic because it does not adhere to dominant academic or museum standards of authority. While this tension is understandable, its presence supports the need to experiment with object-oriented democratic projects.

THE WIKI PROJECT

The wiki project began in a sophomore-level Honors course TMD 224: Culture, Dress and Appearance during the spring 2013 semester. TMD 224 is a requirement for our majors, and it can fulfill a general education requirement in social sciences or foreign language/culture for non-majors. TMD 224 is a popular course that usually exceeds its enrollment of 50 or 100 students depending on semester, and it has traditionally been taught as a lecture class. The Honors section, which has an enrollment cap of 20, provided the opportunity to engage students from many different majors in object-based research; thus, I created a hybrid course that combines traditional lectures and discussions with object-based research and the development of a course wiki using the site, www.wikispaces.com. I learned about Wikispaces from our college’s Information Tech, who put me in touch with a colleague in Education, Dr. Jay Fogleman, who incorporates a wiki into his freshman Honors introductory education course. Wikispaces provides free websites for educational purposes. During the semester, students work in a private Wikispaces site, but they understand that their final work will be migrated to the public wiki at the end of the semester with just a bit of editing. Research has shown that students are more committed to their work “if they are asked to solve a problem or develop an artifact that has meaning outside of the classroom” (Niedbala and Fogleman 2010, 877).

The objects the students research come from the Historic Textile and Costume Collection (HTCC, <http://web.uri.edu/tmd/collections-gallery/>), which is housed in the department of Textiles, Fashion Merchandising and Design at the University of Rhode Island. The HTCC contains approximately 20,000 textiles, apparel, and related objects, and its mission is threefold: teaching, research, and exhibition. While graduate students and some faculty make extensive use of the collection, undergraduate access is usually limited to viewing objects presented as examples in classes or in the Textile Gallery exhibition space. Access to the collection is limited due to class size, collection space, and staff constraints much like other cultural institutions. The HTCC’s Director is a faculty member who still maintains a 2/2 teaching load and its Collection Manager works less than 20 hours a week and only during the academic year. Prior to the development of the Honors section, only those undergraduates enrolled in senior-level historic classes completed object-based research. Non-majors rarely had access.

Like all pedagogical experiments, the Wikispaces project has had its pluses and minuses. While “new Web technology allows for the redesign of traditionally lecture-centered humanities courses by fostering active learning and engaging students as producers of learning content rather than passive consumers of expert-to-novice presentations and textbook content,” it also requires students and instructors to obtain new technical literacies while developing research skills, content knowledge, and pedagogical tools (Lazda-Cazers 2010, 193). Lazda-Cazers found that just like in traditional classes, technology-based instruction requires “instructors to provide a specific structure and clear goals” because “the assumption that all students are comfortable with computer applications and easily adapt to technology in the classroom is erroneous” (Lazda-Cazers 2010, 209). My course experiences supports these findings.

The first rendition of the TMD 224 Honors course and wiki project in the Spring of 2013 included the development of the course wiki with the students involved in every step of its design, from colors, to organizational structure, to development of the object wiki page templates and donor page templates. Students researched their objects individually, but were expected, initially, to collaborate on a donor page. My teaching assistant and I had chosen multiple objects from the collection from individual donors. The idea was not just to present objects as archetypes but include their donor relationship as a way to link multiple objects creating another layer of meaning. The students did not like the group project and available donor information varied considerably; therefore, they were allowed to choose between writing their own donor pages and collaborating to create a single donor page. Only one group chose to create a collaborative page. The open wiki format allows students to view and edit each other’s pages, which is a positive feature if the expectation is for collaborative work. However, we also chose multiples of the same type of object, for example a miser purse, which allowed one student to see the resources another student was using and potentially borrow another students resources without doing their own independent research. Interestingly, students often did not access the other students’ pages even though they were available to view.

At this time, I would like to direct you to the wiki page for the 1817 Queen Stitch Wallet. This page was created by a freshman during the first rendition of the course. His enthusiasm and attention to detail signaled to me the promise of this project. Zach took advantage of additional, outside of regular class, time to view, photograph, and analyze his object. In addition, when we discovered a problem with the formatting of the citations and a temporary fix, he sat down in the hallway after class to immediately go into the html coding to fix the issue on his page. In hindsight, I expected too much of myself and the students in the first class, but because I employed an iterative approach, which included continuous discussion, feedback from students, and shifts in assignments and deadlines, we were able to manage several of these issues. According to the anonymous qualitative course evaluations collected at the end of the semester, the students enjoyed the inclusion of the object-based research and the wiki project, but offered suggestions for improvement. “Object based research could use some more attention in the class. Not necessarily more time spent on it, but clearer explanations of the project/expectations would make for a better experience with the wiki.” More structure and scaffolding of assignments was implemented in the second course with positive results.

In the spring 2014 course, the basic wiki design was in place so students could focus more time and energy on researching and writing their individual object pages; also, the assignment of a donor page was eliminated. New assignments were created with associated rubrics and spread out over the course of the semester to improve student learning through assignment scaffolding. “Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development Theory describes the use of temporary supports or ‘scaffolds’ to guide and support learners during the learning process and to assist them with efficiently completing more

complex tasks independently” (Niedbala and Fogleman 2010, 871). While the first Honors section researched Western dress forms and there was duplication in type of object, the 2014 course explored non-Western objects and there was no object duplication. Students could also view the work produced by students in the previous Honors section, so they had a good idea of the final project’s expectations. Final presentations were added to the spring 2014 class in response to 2013 student evaluations. Students specifically noted that they would like to learn what their fellow classmates were doing and suggested final presentations as a way to learn about this work. So as not to merely regurgitate the information available on the wiki pages, students were divided into 5 groups and each group was given a single-word theme, for example ingenuity, around which to build a presentation.

The spring 2014 TMD 224 Honors section went much smoother; and again, the majority of the students enjoyed the wiki project and suggested ideas for further improvement. One of the things the university did that contributed to this improvement was to integrate Wikispaces into its course management software, Sakai, which allowed students on the course roster to be automatically enrolled in the course wiki. The current public wiki site, which I began to advertise in May 2014, contains 34 object pages, course materials such as syllabi and a grading rubric, a project home page, and a few pages related to how the collection came to be, which includes information on some of our donors. In the future, I hope to increase the number of donor pages after they have been reviewed by interested constituencies. In addition, as the project grows, additional navigational tools will need to be implemented to facilitate ease of exploration. This will be one of the goals of the spring 2015 course.

Because the course and project have only been offered twice, there is still much that can be improved. However, the integration of the object-based research and the wiki has exceeded my expectations of using the wiki platform as a pedagogical and engagement resource. It has and can continue to increase access to the over 20,000+ pieces housed in our Historic Textile and Costume Collection because it is publicly available and sustainable through future class projects. A major benefit of incorporating the wiki project into a course is that the data does not have to be transferred from a traditional paper to a web archive; it is “born digital.” As digital content, it is easily backed up and the text and images can be transferred to future digital programs or copied into collection management software such as Past Perfect.

CONCLUSION

Wikispaces.com is a free or low cost web program that can be used by a multitude of individuals and organizations to engage their audiences and fulfill their missions. The program is easy to use and can be employed by anyone with internet access. There is much potential that could be explored if we expand the types of product we publish, the audiences we engage, and the manner in which we engage them. In the Honors section, students who would not traditionally engage dress through object research had the opportunity to bring their perspective to its study. In the future, donors could be engaged to add information, images, or even content to the pages as authors, collaborators, or just commenters. Including donors in collection documentation through a wiki provides an opportunity to engage important shift in the paradigms related to objects acquisition and documentation (Cameron 2005). Collaborative projects that combine students and other non-professionals with institutional collections and archives in the production of knowledge have great potential particularly for small cultural institutions like historic houses and museums. Understaffed and underfunded institutions can use free or low-cost online programs such as Wikispaces.com to encourage research, writing, and dissemination of information regarding their collections and histories that can also encourage and increase community

engagement with their institutions. Online content can combine images, text, and links to outside resources to broaden the contextual understanding of the information being presented and external audiences can create additional linkages thus expanding the local and global networks of significance. Lastly, Wikispaces has a statistical overview that tracks, among other things, individual visitors, visit country of origin, and number of views that can assist organizations with assessing their community engagement.

To facilitate this type of access their needs to be a reassessment of an institutions responsibility to its publics, a loosening of access to imperfect documentation and analysis, and an acceptance of the role non-professional can play, rather than merely the sanctioned scribes of museum and university authority, as valid contributors to historic knowledge production and dissemination. Currently, we are experimenting with creating a wiki around a 1900 signature crazy quilt that brings together the current Rhode Island based quilt owner, a volunteer at a small historical society in northern California where the signatory quilters lived and the original recipient went to seminary school, relatives in Canada who have conducted genealogical research, and myself. My goal is for us to collaborate on telling this complex story that spans more than a century, two countries, and a continent by collecting all of the pieces of information into one public site that can be used by all of the different groups and the quilt's ultimate home to tell multiple stories. I plan to explore these ideas in the future as I develop community engagement opportunities with small, local Rhode Island cultural institutions.

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