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Resource Review

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Review

This timely book, exploring a range of conceptual connections between HE learning and museum settings, is edited by three colleagues (two Research Fellows and an HE Officer) from the Centre for Excellence in Design (CELTD). Based at the University of Brighton and the Victoria and Albert Museum, this CETL was (like the 73 others in the UK) set up to promote excellent teaching across institutions – in this case through collection-based learning. Unfortunately, while much of the reported drive for collaboration between museums and HE in the UK has come from the CETL itself (through research and conferences), future funding for all CETLs is being wound down and this book feels a little like an epitaph for a moment of possibility. I hope the institutions involved will find the resources to sustain some of the work which, tantalisingly, has begun to raise important questions for innovative learning collaborations.

The 200 pages consist of a preface, 14 chapters and an afterword. Between them the three editors contribute six and a half chapters and the afterword. Four of the remaining chapters are written by academics also based at the University of Brighton, so there ought to be a coherent authorial voice around the overlooked needs of HE students in museums, despite the inevitable differences in approach across the chapters.

The preface is worth a read in itself, providing a valuable reminder that the nineteenth century link between universities and museum collections was only eroded about 30 years ago when museums started to focus more explicitly on the learning needs of school pupils. This shift, it is argued, coincided with a period in Design education when HE students tended to be disengaged from museums, regarding them as 'irrelevant'. The core of the remainder of the book emerges from this shift in context in the last decade, although it is a shame there are a number of repetitions across the chapters returning to this point. Various authors also keep re-emphasising the significance of constructivist approaches to HE learning which, they argue, have come to facilitate more active meaning making.

Chapter 1 points out a dichotomy between the different purposes/functions of HE and museums, but argues for a convergence between the two. Chapter 2 (one of the best) reminds the reader collections formed a key part of student learning in disciplines like Zoology and Medicine, but questions whether museums recognise the needs of current students as a distinctive audience. The argument here differentiates the seismic semantic shift from museum education to museum learning, querying the potential for museums to be part of the 'extended campus'. Primary research is drawn on to identify the point at which students become 'museum savvy' and to set up the rest of the book to address the question: "How can HE student learning be enhanced in the museum?" Chapter 3 notes misunderstandings between museums and universities in terms of supporting student learning, and crucially identifies the gap between Generic Learning Outcomes (GLOs) in museums and assessment requirements in HE. Such differences are identified throughout the book, including differences in 'conceptual space' (chapter 4).

The book is most useful when authors explore authentic examples of HE student learning in museums. Chapter 5 demonstrates students might browse museums to build a 'treasury of ideas', or focus for their dissertations. Chapter 6 notes the aim of a project at Reading's Museum of English Rural Life to avoid the 'lecture with objects' and facilitate interdisciplinary creative problem solving. Chapter 7 suggests students need to handle objects as well as draw them, as part of their reflection, while Chapter 8 argues students prefer the 'desacralised' and tactile rather than the visual overload of curatorial information. Emerging from these pieces is a notion of students' 'museum competence', with theories of cultural capital aligned with common sense notions of familiarity and frequency of visits.

Most disappointing are those chapters which seek to investigate and describe the role of technology in museum/HE collaboration - which could be summarised by the reference to 'cyberbole'. An experimental PDA 'trail' distracts some students from the art, and technical challenges (wireless connectivity) led to a conclusion that such scaffolding should not replace 'wandering'. Chapter 11 argues that museums should avoid too much e-interpretation, and chapters 13 and 14 already feel dated, with use of online gaming and *Second Life* asserted as areas of potential with little evidence to support such views. The one chapter which reports students engaging creatively with collections (through short film collaborations between paired students on theory and practical courses) is more interesting, but required a better use of screen dumps to communicate what learning resulted.

It is perhaps the contrast in approach from the rest of the book taken in chapter 10 which makes it stand out – a conversation between an academic and a curator as they stroll through a museum. This generates a much deeper engagement with what museums might offer HE students, around notions of immersion in ambient information, around the potential for taking students out of their normal frame of reference into a rich material world, and the profound difference between 'telling students' and having them encounter something.

This book is then something of a curate's egg, offering some interesting accounts of the potential for HE staff and students to embed museum collections into their Design learning. But it remains a tantalising taster rather than the definitive word, and a number of assertions are made which require a more nuanced, more contextualised evidence base.

While the lack of coherence is to some extent inevitable in a collection like this, some of the individual chapters (see above) are worth exploring by academics and students (not just in Design) to prompt further thought (and preferably action) to address the disjunction between HE and museums. The reader will learn that museums and HE use different discourses within their separate silos, but that greater permeability of pedagogic ideas could complement one another. The proposal that museums offer new sites for off-campus learning could be a radical one, but the evidence here is not really persuasive. This book's sub-title *Looking to Learn, Learning to See* is a worthy one for HE Art and Design, but requires a sharper focus on how this can be facilitated through museum collaborations.