Teaching & Learning Materials in Online Museums of Contemporary Art

This case study explores educational materials in 91 online museums of contemporary art. The list of institutions is neither country nor region-specific and consists of 56 museums from Europe, 25 from North America, 4 from Australia, 2 from Asia and 2 from Latin America. This selection was the result of applying two criteria: each website had to have an education section – learning, education, pedagogy, etc. – which, in turn, had to contain online learning materials, not just information about the activities taking place at the museum. The goal of the research was twofold: to fathom the reach of educational content in online museums of contemporary art and to identify which part of that content was actually related to Higher Education. As a final step, these findings were contrasted against other educational online resources in non-contemporary art museums and other educational websites.

The museums analysed represent 28% of 324 contemporary art institutions whose websites contain an education section. This percentage paints a disappointing global picture since less than a third of online museums provide learning and/or teaching materials. Further analysis offered detailed information as to the most widespread online educational resources (see *Table 1*). They are briefly described below.

Table 1. Educational materials in 91 online museums of contemporary art.

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Teacher's Guides, student workbooks…	51
Educational Mirco-sites	19
Podcasts (Audio files)	12
Interactive modules	12
Videos	6
Blogs	6
Online Collections	5
Online Exhibitions	4
Articles, reviews & essays	4
Searchable library catalogues	2
Timelines	2
Exhibition guides	1
Mirco-sites for researchers	1
Art courses	1

(Figures indicate the number of museums where that particular content appears.)

Teacher's guides, student workbooks, info-sheets

They are the most popular educational content by far, possibly because they are digital copies of printed materials commonly used in educational activities at the physical museum. A few examples are Whitney's pre- and post-visit materials for teachers, Reina Sofía's learning guides or FRAC Centre's info-sheets. 61% of these types of files are intended for teachers and students of primary and secondary education, the remaining 39% are informative, that is, targeted at an adult audience but not explicitly designed for formal education. Although no mention of Higher Education is made in any of the cases, the informative content for adults could be considered a potential resource for Higher Education.

Educational micro-sites

They are satellite websites which gather all online educational content in one place. All the museums that provide this resource cater only to primary and/or secondary education. 29% contain materials for teachers and students of both education levels, 14% provide materials for primary education, 24% for secondary education, and 24% for teachers of both levels. The remaining 9% contain information about workshops and other learning activities held at the museum. Higher Education is not mentioned *per se*.
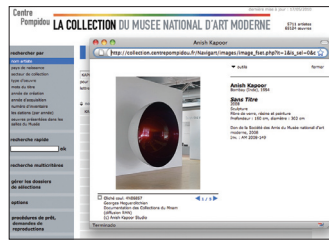
Only the Walker Art Center's 'Arts Connected' microsite, labels some of its content 'for adults' although not in connection to formal education.

Videos and podcasts

Video and audio files are used in two different ways. In most cases they are presented as reference materials stored in repositories, such as the Bilbao Guggenheim, which lists nearly 100 videos and more than 200 audios in its multimedia section. In far fewer cases, video and audio files are embedded in interactive pieces to enrich content. In neither of these two cases are there any indications for use in Higher Education.

Interactives

They cater to two very distinct audiences: children (65%), like Albright Knox's 'Art Games' or Tate's 'Art Detective', and young people and adults (35%). The latter present a complexity in range that goes from simple discovery activities, such as 'Paolozzi's Studio' (National Galleries of Scotland), to more in-depth projects, such as an interactive piece dedicated to Louise Bourgeois (SFMoMA). As in the previous cases, there is no mention of formal teaching or learning for Higher Education.

Blogs

Although they have the potential to be used for debate, they have turned into mere agendas for educational programmes and archives of information about workshops and activities held at the museum.

Online collections and online exhibitions

Surprisingly, only five museums (Tate, Walker Art, Albrigh Knox, SFMoMA and MMOCA) link their online collections to teaching and learning. The same is true for online exhibitions. Once again, in neither case Higher Education seems a concern. Adult programmes related to permanent collections and temporary exhibitions are always offered at the museum.

Articles, reviews and essays

Schrim Kunsthalle and MACs, among others, provide this type of editorial content in their websites' education section; however, there's no reference to educational levels.

The remaining formats (searchable library catalogues, timelines, exhibition guides, micro-sites for researchers and art courses) are negligible. Although they could prove of assistance for teaching and learning, only one or two museums grant them any educational value at all.

Previous data show that none of the educational resources provided by online museums of contemporary art are specifically designed for Higher Education. Teaching and learning materials developed as support for academic institutions cater only to primary and secondary education. Nevertheless, online museums of contemporary art provide a number of resources intended for an adult audience which could be of use for Higher Education if refurbished. Firstly, there is *raw content*: digitised documents stored in repositories and categorised in indexes. Materials of this type can be found in microsites for researchers such as MACM's 'Mediathéque', or in archival sections for a general audience, as in ACCA's 'Resources' section, which also includes education kits. This is useful when locating files by type. However, if the assets are not interrelated, they remain as contextless data. Secondly, *online collections* are rich repositories of images and information. They are a step beyond *raw content*, since images are contextualised with various degrees of additional information. For example, although most online collections are databases providing only images and brief gallery labels (Pompidou), a small number of online collections also include introductory texts (MCA Chicago), links
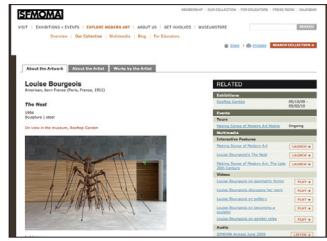
to other works of art (Moderna Museet), artists' biographies (MART), and audio or video files, (ARTIUM). Thirdly, there are *informative pieces*, either in print format, such as MAC/VAL's articles and MUDAM's exhibition guides, or in interactive format such as those available in MoMA's multimedia archive. Both of them present content centered around a particular theme or topic, providing at least a basic context.
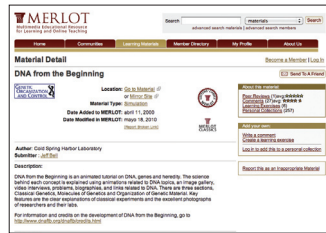
This state of affairs proves that the online content offered by museums of contemporary art for their adult audiences is mostly informative and expository. Therefore, how can online museums of contemporary art rise over the information level and turn data into educational content? Other online museums and institutions not related to contemporary art use a few strategies that provide some useful references.

Research on a number of non-contemporary art museums shows that there is a great similarity in the types and formats of online educational materials. However, two aspects stand out by comparison. On the one hand, art museum websites, such as the Metropolitan or the Rijksmuseum, make good use of extensive contextualisation (*The Timeline of Art History, A Thousand Exhibits*, respectively) in a way that no contemporary art museum really does. Both museums integrate a wide selection of works of art and information into a network of textual and visual connections. This hypermedia model steers away from databases and indexes of contextless data, and presents visitors with thematic routes to follow and explore. Although the Metropolitan specifically states that this resource is intended for 'students, educators, (and) scholars', there is no reference to school curricula. On the other hand, other online museums give visitors the opportunity to redefine the museum's online assets by social tagging. This feature, used by a good number of online museums and institutions (the PowerHouse Museum, the Smithsonian Photography Initiative, the Finnish National Gallery, etc.), gives online visitors the opportunity to use their own words to label the museum's resources with multiple criteria. Some terms are more relevant to museum professionals (artist, year, department…) while others may help occasional visitors (famous, seascape, Campbell Soup…), but they also could prove useful for educational purposes by identifying grade, theme, subject, etc. Tagging allows the museum audience to organise content to their liking and in a way that is meaningful to them. Museums like the Walker Art take this initiative one step further, allowing the audience to build presentations made of images, texts and audiovisual files. By allowing social tagging and personal selections of raw content, new sets of related information are created, duly credited (to museum staff, educators or visitors) and eventually made available to the museum's online audience.

Interestingly, the most relevant use of online teaching and learning materials specifically developed for Higher Education comes not from online museums but from organisations closely related to them. The Virtual Museum of Canada, developed by the Canadian Heritage Information Network (CHIN), provides lesson plans created by museum professionals from Grade 1 to Higher Education. They are based on the Learning Object model. A Learning Object is, broadly speaking, an online lesson plan made up of a collection of different resources (video, texts, etc.) with specific learning objectives and metadata for identification and cataloguing. They are modular and their content can be shared and reused in other Learning Objects. Some popular repositories of Learning Objects are *Merlot*, dedicated to science and also developed for Higher Education, *Careo* created by the University of Calgary or *EduSource*, a Canada-wide project designed to create

a network of inter-operable Learning Object repositories.

The most relevant conclusion of this research is that online museums of contemporary art do not really provide educational materials for Higher Education. However, they do offer rich resources of categorised but scarcely contextualised data. Taking this into account, it would be helpful for educational purposes to organise online content within a context. Previous examples show two possible approaches. On the one hand, online museums have the option to develop their own content-aware projects. They may take the form of thematic routes and essays, repositories of Learning Objects, lesson plans and, if the museum has more sophisticated resources, engaging interactives. All these formats move away from scattered data towards information clusters. They are easier to handle by teachers and students and more convenient to identify regarding education levels and subjects. On the other hand, visitors can create content for their particular needs – whether teaching, learning or research – as long as the museum provides tools not only to locate and browse its online assets, but to repurpose them.

These options are the result of analysing present museum websites and some features of the Web 2.0. It is impossible to foresee what changes lay ahead and how they will affect online museums. However, there is a clear evolution from databases to relational information and from audience browsing to audience participation. Periodical revisions of online educational content are necessary to identify trends and to locate successful experiences. Such experiences could serve as models, both for museums that have already invested in online education but are seeking to improve their efforts, as well as for museums that are considering to expand their educational mission into the Net.

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