Reframing the small university museum

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Abstract

This paper considers the application of five specific, related frameworks, usually associated with large, well-funded institutions and discusses how they can be applied to a small campus museum. We discuss programs developed by the Australian History Museum at Macquarie University in Sydney and show how these support either individual or multiple frameworks. We therefore contend that the utilisation of this set of frameworks is a positive methodology for the consideration of current museum programs and the development of new programs. We also argue that a higher education setting, with its diversity of intellectual resources, is fertile territory for this type of museological conceptualisation.

Keywords: University museums, conceptual frameworks, collaboration

Introduction

This paper is an investigation of the ways in which a small university museum can adopt a similar outward facing philosophy and practice as that adopted by larger, mainstream museums.

The Australian History Museum (AHM) is one of a number of museums at Macquarie University in Sydney. It is located within the Department of Modern History, Politics and International Relations within the Faculty of Arts. Universities develop collections for a number of reasons.1 The collections of the Australian History Museum grew from a pre-existing teaching collection, a dedicated exhibition space opened in 1996. The exhibition and collection themes embrace indigenous Australia, immigration, women, war and society.

Like that experienced by many university museums, the relationship between a museum and its higher education parent institution can be complex and varied. This can include the impact of changing senior university leadership on campus museums.2 Macquarie University currently adopts a disjunct governance model3 for its university museums and collections, there is no centralised coordination of museum activities or governance. The museum has a Management Committee consisting of academic staff members from the host department.

Like many museums within a department within a university without a coordinated institutional strategy, it is faced with challenges of limited space, staffing, budget, public
awareness and accessibility. Unlike well-funded state and national institutions, it doesn’t have
the benefit of being a destination in its own right. In this fast-paced digital-age, museums that
are poorly resourced and have a limited profile by virtue of their institutional positioning, in
general, often run the risk of becoming stagnant, edging ever closer to being considered a
‘glorified-storage-facility’.

There are, however, many ways that the small museum can reimagine itself in order to create
and/or maintain vibrant relationships with its patrons and society in general. At the AHM we
have reframed the way we operate in order to sustain a two-way relationship with our
stakeholders and, essentially, continue to justify our existence as a working collection and
exhibition space. We have borrowed the concepts from mainstream museology usually
associated with larger, independent collecting organisations.

There are many different pressures in modern museum practice that encourage museums to
be proactive, inclusive, purposeful and to have a positive impact on audiences. Much of the
thinking associated with this stems from museums seeking to demonstrate their instrumental
value resulting from public investment.\textsuperscript{4}

This paper considers five frameworks of value provision associated with large museums and
shows that they can be applied to small specific purpose higher education museums. The five
frameworks for considering the Australian History Museum’s ‘conceptualization’ can be
categorised into these main areas or topics: beyond the physical; informer; carer; mentor and
collaborator. The first of these (beyond the physical – the projection of information beyond
the walls of the museum) provides a platform that enables the other frameworks that
represent different forms of engagement.

\textbf{Beyond the Physical}

While important in the university museum context, the ability to envision the museum
‘beyond the physical’ (the objects, the display cabinets, the storage space) is a very important
step for any collecting institution. Embracing digital solutions can often be daunting,
especially for museums that are low on budget, staff and time. It is, however, important to
recognise that audiences today are global … if you want them. With this in mind, and at the
risk of adopting the salesmen’s mantra, it is not a question of how can you afford to get online; but how can you afford not to?

An online presence is vital and a constantly evolving requirement for all museums.\textsuperscript{5} Whether it is a fully-dedicated custom website, a blogsite, or simply a page on a tourist site, as a base level this allows for the sharing of important contact, event, and collection information with potential visitors, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. A strong Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) strategy can also offer increased awareness, with high ranking sites or pages allowing the public the happy accident of ‘stumbling-upon’ them. Having an online presence does not guarantee increased revenue or increase the trickle of visitors to a flood, based on visitor behaviour – the true value is in the increased awareness; with visitors often using a museum website to find out about recent events and exhibits, search museum collections, get directions and hours of opening.\textsuperscript{6}

As a university museum, the AHM has both the benefits and restrictions of having a microsite within a larger institutional website. We have the benefit of a supported Content Management System (CMS) in which to build our website. From a google search perspective, being part of the university’s site assists our ranking. But we are also left with a fairly rigid structure to our website that does not always allow for creative flair and outside-the-square online exhibition design. For this reason we have decided to play to our strengths – to focus more on online content for its research and educational value, rather than its aesthetics and edgy design.

The Australian History Museum has incorporated a publicly searchable collection database to our website, allowing (and prompting) an increase in the use of the collection by researchers (academic and general public), educators and students. Collection access is now available to people who are not physically able to visit the museum and those that do visit can now plan and prepare based on their objects of interest, or can maintain a connection with us after their visit has ended. Our database is also regularly integrated into education programs and student assessment tasks at various levels of study – from primary schooling through to postgraduate degree programs.\textsuperscript{7}

Other than the opportunities of awareness and information sharing, being online also allows for a virtual exhibition space. Where space is at a premium, this becomes an infinite extension
of the museum’s physical presence. Not just a solution to space, online exhibitions allow for the easy integration of mixed media and related information in a way that may be less fluid in a physical display, all of which can be viewed by a virtual-visitor anywhere and at any time. Online exhibitions also allow for international partnership projects, as well as ease of integration with education programs across primary, high school and tertiary institutions in both their use and development.

Social Media, like it or not, is a driving force in today’s society, so small museums owe it to themselves to join that conversation and the potential it offers. Social history museums, in particular, are ripe with prospects for social sharing platforms. Not subject to as many copyright related restrictions as institutions such as art galleries, the social history museum houses a plethora of quirky, relatable and mundanely fascinating material that can reach a wide audience and appeal to them on many levels. Beyond this, different social sharing platforms can allow the museum to adopt different personas in order to connect with different social, cultural and age groups.

Currently, the AHM’s Social Media portfolio includes Twitter, Facebook, Flickr and the newly adopted Instagram. Social Media has been a platform for sharing object information in relation to important events and calendar dates as well as creating challenges, quizzes and games using the collection as the foundation for these – but it also offers huge potential to engage in multi-directional conversations that feed back into and expand the information the museum has about its collection. It is a useful way to connect with and support peers, and to develop an awareness of the Museum and Collection sector in general. As social media is not so dependent on computer infrastructure, much of it can be driven by smart phone technologies.

For the small museum, a social media portfolio is also a great way of driving engagement with younger members of the community as well as student interns and volunteers. At the AHM we recognise that aptly named ‘digital natives’ – a generation of people born into the digital era – are constantly surrounded by a large variety of continuously evolving information technologies. Harnessing representatives from this generation has the potential of developing novel connections with new audiences and museum content. An example of the value of this to the AHM are projects that have brought in undergraduate and postgraduate Media and
Marketing Studies students at the University. This has provided fresh perspectives, as well as different ways of thinking and doing; the relationships forged with these students and educators has illustrated the value of the social history museum to a new stream within the university.

In order to improve and future proof the Social Media portfolio plans for the museum, it has recently been used as a case study client for a Media Studies Postgraduate unit at the university. The unit assigns a team of students to assess our Social Media Portfolio and design a strategy to improve the relevance our current activity to prospective stakeholders. Because this unit will run each year, potentially with each new intake of students comes new and innovative ideas to drive change and innovative practice. It is the potential of these sorts of collaborations that allows us to posit that university museums are fertile ground for experimental museum practice.8

Perhaps one of the more ground-breaking projects we have been working on recently is the adoption of 3-Dimensional technology solutions. It is very easy to get caught-up in the hype that is 3D technology, especially the wonderment that is 3D printing,9 though the AHM has primarily focused its efforts on the adoption of 3D scanning. As a university museum we have the benefit of having fantastic IT facilities, especially in relation to 3D technology. The previously available hardware and software was not simple. For this reason, we were fortunate enough to partner with other department projects within the Faculty of Arts, so that our interns could receive training and supervision whilst scanning objects from our collection. The museum conducted a pilot intern placement program in the second half of 2014; the success of this was marked with further grants to work on larger and more complex projects in this field. A revised project on a larger scale, with upgraded hardware and software (that cuts the scanning time dramatically) commenced at the start of 2016.

The main aim of the 3D scanning project is to create an online resource of high resolution 3D models that can be accessed by any person with the internet anywhere, any time – thus increasing the collection’s visibility tremendously. The museum can then continue to build education packages around these resources for primary, high school and tertiary groups that can be simply downloaded from the web portal. The catalogue should also encourage ease of integration with existing education programs as well as academic research, whilst providing
rural and remote ‘visitors’ a chance to experience the collection in full. Other than the immense educational value the 3D catalogue will provide, it will also provide an object back-up solution and support the preservation of the physical objects in the collection. The museum is fortunate to be able to create relationships with staff and students from Education programs on campus, providing useful experiences for the students and building on the resources the museum has to offer. Copies of rare and fragile items can be used for object-based learning programs.\(^1\)

3D digital images of the objects can also be integrated into physical displays through the use of Augmented Reality solutions as well as guided-tour apps. This allows for objects, seen behind glass, to be viewed at all angles and allows for the visitor to further engage with a display.

It is also important to understand that the physical and digital are not mutually exclusive. At the AHM we try to integrate both into an exhibit in a way that appeals to a broader audience. The integration of digital elements into a physical display can broaden the appreciation and understanding of the content, allowing for the display to be seen also for its technical and creative-design elements, potentially broadening the visitor profile. This can be something as simple as integrating a QR code into a display that directs a visitor to an instructional video clip, audio file, image slideshow or more information. Alternatively, it could be creating a digital tour experience for a physical display using a custom-design app or already available solutions that are currently free for museums to use.\(^1\)

**Informer**

The association of the museum as “informer” is nothing new, museums have been houses of sage and curious wisdom since their inception. Much has been written on museums as information providers.\(^1\)\(^2\) The link between collections and knowledge in higher education is well established.\(^1\)\(^3\) Because of this long association it is often easy for the museum to rest on the laurels of its predecessors, seeing a few labels as enough to maintain the role of informer to a crowd that can bring Google up on their mobile phones in a matter of seconds. The key here is not to focus on what other informers might distract from the museum, but rather to understand how these other informers can be utilised to further support and enhance the museum experience.
The Australian History Museum has a scalable education model, with a base source-work analysis program that can be reshaped, built-on and adapted depending on the student level and curriculum topic. This allows for a tried and tested solution with the ability to reach a wide educational market. Beyond this, educational programs must be relevant; we tailor our school programs and kits to current curriculum requirements, so teachers and students engage in a significant and worthwhile manner. Due to our physical location in NSW, our face-to-face education programs have been predominantly developed in consideration of the NSW Board of Studies curriculum. The education kits that are created in relation to our online exhibitions, however, take on a national curriculum focus. An example of this is the different versions of the ‘Migrant to Citizen’ education program that were developed specifically to take in to consideration those variances in focus.

Embracing the role of university museum, the AHM supports and integrates, wherever possible, with departments and faculties on campus. Our artefacts often form part of student research and assessment tasks and the museum often hosts tutorials and seminars. Use of physical objects are at the core of a variety of tutorials developed as part of specific university level units of study, as well as primary and high school programs. Collaborative projects and exhibitions staged across the campus with other collections have further developed an awareness of the AHM to new types of audiences. A useful example of this was the 2014 exhibition ‘Affinities: Seven Museums, Fifty Objects’ which was an exercise in highlighting the synergies between seven very different university collections. The importance of what this exhibition presented was recognised with a 2014 MAGNA award.

Seeing the museum as informer is not just about creating education programs for schools and university students. The museum should also be an informer to the community (or communities) in which it sits, and a range of organisations visit and are involved in a variety of capacities, from RSL branches and genealogical societies to aged care facilities. The museum is constantly looking for new ways to engage with new audiences. We also see benefit in understanding that the role of informer goes both ways. We rely on our stakeholders to build on the stories, histories and experiences being told and shared through the museum. Adding interactive elements to a display can create another dimension where the exhibit not only informs the audience but becomes a platform for the audience to inform others. What better way to engage with the audience than to make them a part of the story.
being told or to give them an opportunity to share their own experience and history. All collaborative endeavours in modern museum work are opportunities to learn and grow.

Carer

The idea of the museum as carer has been a subtext of mainstream museum work for many years, but only recently has there been some theoretical exploration in terms of new museology. It is most commonly couched in terms of museum service provision for the elderly, something not often associated within a corporatized higher education system. Yet it represents a unique way in which higher education can provide meaningful qualitative community engagement.

While the “Museum as Carer” is perhaps a less common reframing in this context, it is one that is currently gaining momentum and represents an extension of earlier programs run by the University Art Gallery. While it is discussed only briefly here, we anticipate it will become an area of increasing focus in coming years to ensure it is engaging with the wider community in meaningful ways. This approach is built around the concept of how the museum can give back and support the community in which it exists (be it local or far reaching). It is important to not adopt the build-it-and-they-will-come attitude, but rather assess the community wants and needs and actively work towards collaboratively addressing perceived shortfalls. Ongoing research projects will support our understanding of community needs and development opportunities.

The Australian History Museum sits on Macquarie University grounds in North Ryde, and a number of Aged Care Facilities are located in close proximity. For this reason it was considered a useful community contribution to develop a dementia therapy program based on the concept of reminiscence therapy. A pilot program was developed and tested in 2013, Music, Memory and Museums, in collaboration with Psychology and Cognitive Science staff and students on campus. The program integrated live music with social history objects as a form of reminiscence therapy and was successful in engaging with dementia sufferers. Since then the AHM has further developed the program and has integrated the object therapy into the Art and Alzheimer program at the Macquarie University Art Gallery. The new collaborative program or Art and Object Engagement has developed well, resulting in a regular group of attendees, and will hopefully lead to future research partnerships with Psychology, Sociology
The Australian History Museum also has well established programs relevant for local migrant residents. These can also be framed as “Museum as Carer” programs. This is important given that New South Wales is the only Australian state that doesn’t have a museum dedicated to either its immigration history or history, a remarkable anomaly indeed. One that was compounded by the closure of the Migration Heritage Centre at the Powerhouse Museum and indicative of a policy vacuum in this area from the current (and previous) state government. Furthermore, to provide institutional context, Macquarie University is home to a student population of over 40,000 representing over 100 nationalities.\(^\text{19}\)

The museum is therefore constantly looking for ways to engage with a large international student population. An area currently being targeted is ESL (English as Second Language) programs, with discussions focussing on ways that the social history museum can provide context for these students. Introduction to Australian social history programs are run in the museum using sources to discuss different aspects of Australian history and culture with people new to the country. This process can also obviously be framed as socially inclusive practice that aligns with the universities principles and practices.

**Mentor**

The Museum as Mentor is a very beneficial and scalable concept. It is one that can be considered at either the organisational or individual level. They are usually opportunities that encourage exploration, observation and creativity. The former is usually considered in terms of larger state or national organisations mentoring small or volunteer organisations, in the later it relates to the provision of internship and work experience opportunities.

It has already provided opportunities to broaden experience and build networks; it is reliant on the Museum’s commitment to provide access to training in various aspects of museum management, while focussing on mutually beneficial gains. For example, comprehensive intern and volunteer exposure to areas such as collection management (tools and processes) and curatorial training ensures that what they then produce as a part of the program has a defined benefit to the museum. The Australian History Museum does not have a budget to
pay interns or volunteers and thus recognises the need for placement tasks to be of high educational and vocational value. As such placements are specifically designed around projects so the intern or volunteer develops a sense of ownership and responsibility, whilst improving both industry-specific and broader project management skillsets.

University museums, unlike other small museums, can often offer students, interns and volunteers opportunities to engage with new technologies whilst exploring the potential of their specific degrees (this can be as broad as marketing or computer science). As mentor, the Australian History Museum, also provides opportunities for collaborative, cross-disciplinary group placements where students from different backgrounds (such as engineering and computer science to modern history and education) can work together and share different approaches. Benefits of the mentor relationship for the AHM include integration of new perspectives and approaches, availability of a varied skillset, the ability to resource, and thus take-on, more projects, and increased exposure through community engagement.

As a university museum it is also important to develop a mentor/mentee relationship with peers. The AHM relies on the many collections at Macquarie University for assistance and guidance in different areas. The Macquarie University’s Museums and Collections (MUMAC) group consist of staff occupying a range of different positions responsible for the management of individual museums and collections on campus covering the sciences, history and the arts. The MUMAC group meets regularly to discuss collaborative activities and share resources. The MUMAC group essentially acts as a sector self-help group within the higher education institution. The museum is also planning to develop opportunities with sector industry peers and external partners in order to share knowledge and experience and learn from the experiences of others.

**Collaborator**

Finally, collaboration brings all of the above together. Museums as social enterprises in the context of modern museology are increasingly viewed more as collaborators than experts. This is part of the reorientation away from objects and collections and towards people and relationships. It is just as important for a small university museum to pursue this approach as it is for a large state funded institution.
Without understanding the essential nature of this approach to reframing a small university museum each topic discussed above is likely to fail or at least be limited in reach and impact. Without a central commitment to the importance of building collaborative relationships, projects and solutions will not reach their greatest potential. While a museum situated within a university has a readily available collection of potential internal stakeholders, it takes an enormous amount of negotiating to develop relationships that will ultimately be mutually beneficial and allow those potential stakeholders to understand the power of working together.

At the time of writing, the museum maintains relationships on campus that include various departments within the Faculties of Arts, Science and Engineering, Education and Human Sciences, and various service provider groups such as Marketing and Information Technology. Work with academic departments in this capacity ranges from source-based assessment unit integration and museum content translation and interpretation through to the loaning of items as film props or social media portfolio development and analysis. As noted above the Australian History Museum also works with other museums and collections on campus to create collaborative exhibitions and share resources.

Externally, some of the many relationships developed as a result of collaborative engagement include those with many aged care facilities, primary schools, high schools, the Greek Consulate in Sydney, local RSL groups, local genealogy groups, historical societies and PROBUS clubs. By taking advantage of the Corporate Engagement section of the university and the resources they provide on campus we have engaged with corporate partners in the local business park. Although quite new, this relationship both increases exposure for the museum and collection and offers the potential of financial support.

Reframing the operations at the Australia History Museum has not only produced sustainable new multi-faceted relationships with stakeholders, the end result is also empowering for the casual visitor who ultimately benefits from the richness of these relationships and the diverse ways knowledge about the ‘object’ can be disseminated.

Notes

3. One of the four-tiered system outlined by Simpson (2012), Modelling governance structures for university museums and collections.

4. These issues have been explored by Scott (2009).

5. There is an extensive historical literature on this subject, for example: Besser (1997), The transformation of the museum and the way it’s perceived; Cameron (2003), Digital Futures I: Museum collections, digital technologies, and the cultural construction of knowledge; Coburn & Baca (2004), Beyond the gallery walls: Tools and methods for leading endusers to collections information; and various contributors in Anderson (ed) (2012), Reinventing the Museum: The Evolving Conversation on the Paradigm Shift.

6. The database for the collection was developed separately from other collection information systems at the university, this is a characteristic of a disjunct governance system (Simpson 2012) where an institution lacks centralised coordination. At Macquarie University this issue is currently being partially addressed by bringing collection data from the Faculty of Arts into the one system.

7. Simpson et al. (2013), Museum literacy that is virtually engaging.

8. Simpson (2006), University Museums and an Incubator and Interchange for Museum Practice.


10. Simpson & Hammond (2012), University collections and object based pedagogies.

11. One example of this used by the museum is the izi.TRAVEL app. (https://izi.travel/en)


15. The MAGNA Awards (Museums And Galleries National Awards) are awarded annually by Museums Australia. Affinities won an award in 2014 in the temporary and travelling exhibition category.


20. The MUMAC group was previously a formal committee of the university reporting to the Vice-Chancellor. This arrangement ceased in 2006 with a change of leadership, but the group continues to meet and work together in an informal capacity.

References


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