

Experiential Learning without Student Exploitation? An Autoethnography of Cultural Heritage Stewardship Pedagogy

Ana Roeschley^a, Nathan Brown^a, Yunfei Du^a, Laura Evans^a, Amber Ada^a, Kinza Alizai^a, Jupiter Allen^a, Brianna Afemon^a, Bailey Bark^a, Heather Breslin^a, Merrion Dale Frederick^a, Abigail Fosburgh^a, Alexandria Hernandez^a, Caitlin Jones^a, Taylor Lauren Lacy^a, Mollie Jean Meek^a, Julia Ballarin Missawa^a, Alice Passon^a, Patricia Perez^a, Emily Pojman^a, Kenneth Saintonge^a, Isabel Saldivar^a, Haiden Scheffrin^a, Joseph Sioui^a, J. Julane Teel^a, Crystal Tharayil^a, and Autumn E. Wagner^a

^a University of North Texas, United States

ana.roeschley@unt.edu, Nathan.Brown@unt.edu, yunfei.du@unt.edu, Laura.Evans@unt.edu, AmberAda@my.unt.edu, kinzaalizai@my.unt.edu, laurenallen5@my.unt.edu, BriannaAfemon@my.unt.edu, BaileyBark@my.unt.edu, HeatherBreslin@my.unt.edu, jessicadale@my.unt.edu, AbigailFosburgh@my.unt.edu, AlexHernandez6@my.unt.edu, CaitlinJones3@my.unt.edu, TaylorLacy@my.unt.edu, MollieMeek@my.unt.edu, JuliaMissawa@my.unt.edu, SarahPasson@my.unt.edu, PatriciaPerez@my.unt.edu, EmilyMirsky@my.unt.edu, KennethSaintonge@my.unt.edu, IsabelSaldivar@my.unt.edu, HaidenScheffrin@my.unt.edu, JosephSioui@my.unt.edu, JulaneTeel@my.unt.edu, CrystalTharayil@my.unt.edu, AutumnWagner@my.unt.edu

ABSTRACT

Co-authored by University of North Texas (UNT) students and faculty mentors in the Colleges of Information and Visual Arts and Design, this autoethnographic paper reports on the Latino Art, Museums, and Preservation (LAMP) fellowship—an initiative to strengthen the creation, production, and access to history and cultural activities of Latino communities in the US. Using an experiential learning approach, the fellowship serves the needs of graduate students through adaptive curriculum design, relationality through mentorship and cohort building, on-site learning at the Mexican American Civil Rights Institute (MACRI), tuition support, internship stipends, as well as funding for lodging, travel, and sustenance. Beyond supporting individual fellows, the fellowship catalyzed a graduate certificate program in cultural heritage stewardship. Preliminary results include growing interdisciplinarity and collaboration between students, faculty, and cultural heritage stewards outside of academia, as well as an increased educational capacity that is sustainable for future cultural heritage training efforts—even in the absence of federal funding.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

Museums; Archives; Pedagogy; Specific populations; Research methods.

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

Cultural heritage stewardship; internships; autoethnography; graduate academic certificate; art education.

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

As students and faculty engaged in a hands-on learning initiative with a focus on interdisciplinary cultural heritage stewardship at the University of North Texas (UNT) Colleges of Information (COI) and Visual Arts and Design (CVAD), we are exploring possible paths towards experiential learning without exploitation of student labor. Our collaboration was initiated as part of a museum-focused training project providing professional coaching, mentoring, and financial support for student fellows advancing their careers in Latino museums and cultural preservation studies. As faculty mentors and students, we seek to develop and refine an interdisciplinary curriculum in cultural heritage stewardship to support students and the cultural heritage field beyond the grant period. To gauge the impacts of the initiative beyond the term-limited fellowship, this paper includes autoethnographic reflections from both funded fellows in the training program and non-funded students in the newly developed Cultural Heritage Stewardship (CHS) course that incorporates experiential learning into classroom activities.

The fellowship program was established as part of an Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) federal grant in response to the growing need to build capacity for Latino museums and serve the cultural heritage needs of Latino communities in the US (Treskon et al., 2023). As our university is one of the few Hispanic-Serving Institutions ranked as an R1 research institution, our project faculty felt a responsibility to meet this need. A graduate certificate approach was chosen for the fellowship as a certificate can be added to master's degree program or pursued as standalone certificate. LAMP program fellows are fully funded for a 15-hour graduate academic certificate program, either the newly formed CHS certificate in COI or the long-standing Art Museum Education Certificate from CVAD. The CHS Certificate courses include Seminar in CHS (in which students learn theory and gain professional skills through a semester-long grant writing project, guest talks and lectures, field trips to cultural heritage sites, and seminar discussions (3 hours)), Seminar in Art Museums (3 hours taken in CVAD), Preservation of Special Format Materials (a hands-on lab course (3 hours)), and Museum Archive Professional Internship (6 hours). The Art Museum Education Certificate is a 15-hour includes Seminar in Art Museums (3 hours), Art Museum Education 1 (focused on how to teach with objects (3 hours)), Art Museum Education 2 (focused on how to build programs for diverse museum audiences (3 hours)), and 6 hours of applied internship.

Experiential learning can develop motivation, self-regulation, and collaboration skills through tasks, coaching, and personalized scaffolding. Internships are a common application of experiential learning theory (ELT) connecting the future library and information science (LIS) workforce to the profession, their activities, and challenges faced by practitioners (Coleman, 1989; Bird et al., 2015). In both our own program and in LIS education widely, unpaid internships are normalized (Cifor & Watson, 2020). However, by ensuring that entry into the profession is more difficult for students without economic advantages, "unpaid internships only perpetuate existing inequities" (Wildenhaus, 2019, p. 7). Keeping this dichotomy in mind, it is important to ensure that any initiatives with limited student internship support are designed with embedded experiential learning opportunities that can be sustained after the end of the funding period.

Although experiential learning in LIS is well documented, translating archival and museum concepts into classroom settings remains a challenge. Frameworks related to libraries, archives, and museums often remain siloed (Flinn, 2010), while the authority of archives is contested in relation to contextual truths and access (Wang, 2022). Douglas (2017) argues that pedagogy must foreground affect, context, and process, while Cifor (2015) emphasizes that preservation is as emotional and relational as it is technical. Teaching cultural heritage stewardship requires moving beyond traditional divisions and preparing students to view cultural heritage preservation as a situated, ethical practice.

To address the challenges mentioned above, this paper utilizes autoethnography to explore these research questions:

1. What are effective and non-exploitative ways to develop students' professional and cultural competency skills in museum internships and seminar classes?
2. How are the pedagogical approaches to the CHS curriculum and LAMP internship program perceived by students in preparing them for careers in cultural heritage stewardship?

METHODOLOGY

Autoethnographic and participatory action research methods were chosen because they can empower “research participants, helping them to improve their well-being and situations in their communities or organizations” (Dali & Charbonneau, 2024, p. 183). Through this approach, reporting on the impacts of the LAMP initiative centers student voices and provides nuanced insight into aspects of the student experience that are missed in extractive studies that can only provide the voice of the instructor as author. In addition to being a more equitable approach to conducting research on the impacts of LIS pedagogical practices, faculty and student co-authorship also provides an opportunity for further experiential learning in guiding students through the processes of conducting and publishing original research.

Autoethnography, a qualitative research method that brings together elements of autobiography and ethnography, combines personal narrative with social context, allowing researchers to explore their experiences within broader cultural frameworks by using self-reflection to gain insights into their own identity and role within society. Invited by our faculty mentors to co-author this paper, the students who chose to participate in this paper include seven first- and second-year fellows funded by the initiative, and 16 Spring 2024 and Spring 2025 CHS students who did not receive funding from the project. Students used guided narrative reflections to provide feedback on which aspects of LAMP supported learning, and components of the curriculum and internship design that need to be improved. Once gathered, the guided reflections were incorporated into the findings and discussion by the first author of our paper before being reviewed and approved by all co-authors.

Autoethnography allows researchers to contextualize lived experiences within the broader settings of justice, authority, and pedagogy. In archival education, paradigm shifts have highlighted the ethical responsibility of educators to incorporate marginalized perspectives (Caswell & Cifor, 2016; Christen, 2012). Participatory approaches in library and archival instruction have been shown to empower students by decentering traditional authority and

creating dialogic spaces (Young & Brownotter, 2018; Soto, 2021; Pagowsky et al., 2023). By co-authoring with students, our project aligns with this tradition of collaborative and justice-oriented pedagogy.

RESULTS

Compiled from autoethnographic reflections from student co-authors, these results highlight the value of experiential learning, benefits of mentorship and exposure to new ideas, and critical curriculum gaps that need to be addressed. In accordance with autoethnographic methods, the findings are written primarily in the first person to highlight the direct impacts the fellowship and CHS curriculum have had on students.

These reflections mirror challenges in cultural heritage education where disciplinary differences in terminology expectations complicate teaching. Prior research has shown that archival description itself can be a contested site of power (Duff & Harris, 2002; Gilliland, 2011), while museum education similarly struggles with scaffolding and enabling access across diverse audiences (Latham, 2018). The challenge of triangulating these disciplinary perspectives highlights the value of classroom spaces that synthesize archives, museums, and libraries in ways that encourage students to interrogate the cultural assumptions embedded in each domain critically.

Findings from Internship Fellows

As fellows, we found that the biggest benefit to participating in the fellowship is, quite frankly, the funding. Funding allows students to participate and receive a graduate certificate, which can be applied as part of a larger degree, such as a master's or a stand-alone certification to help build knowledge on the subject matter of cultural heritage stewardship. On an academic and application level, the institutional partnership between UNT and the Mexican American Civil Rights Institute (MACRI) allows fellows to connect with an institution through the internship. The required internship can provide a wealth of experience and knowledge that is rooted in the Latino culture and community of San Antonio and with an institution whose mission is chronicling and advancing Mexican American civil rights, specifically. The internship provides us with a unique experience that is connected to the overarching discussions in the other fellowship courses about cultural representation, narratives, social justice, and the relevance of proper historical documentation and preservation.

Several of us expressed the belief that relationships with fellow students and mentoring by all the instructors related to this program have been very impactful and beneficial. One of us, a fellow in the CHS certificate, believes that the experience in his first two semesters of the certificate compelled him to upgrade to a full LIS master's. This wouldn't have happened without the inspiration provided by the instructors and welcome from fellow classmates.

Fellows who completed our internships in the previous year continue to carry the impact of that experience with us. For several of us, this experience resulted in the closest friendships we have at the university. If not for this fellowship, we would not have our current support system of friends and professors. Through these deepening friendships, we have peers to talk to about

applying for jobs, museums, libraries, and archival issues. Our guiding professor has also been a recommender for additional jobs and internship opportunities and is very supportive overall.

This is not to say that the program is perfect. In particular, as LAMP focuses on Latino cultural heritage, supplemental resources or a project that better primes participants in understanding the Latino presence in the cultural heritage fields (or the lack thereof), in addition to the internship experience, would be helpful and specifically rewarding to the fellowship. The present coursework is sufficient in highlighting the importance of cultural competency skills for underserved communities. However, those of us who have already finished the internship feel that the burden of teaching cultural competency in the context of Latino communities' cultural needs fell on MACRI—suggesting that the curricula in both certificate tracks need to be more proactive in addressing the cultural needs of Latino communities specifically.

Findings from Cultural Heritage Stewardship Students

Though we did not receive financial support, we benefited from the CHS curriculum, which provided well-rounded resources to prepare us for careers in cultural heritage. Focusing on both the philosophical and the practical has given us the motivation to imagine and work towards a better world while being prepared for careers in the world as it is now. Each week of the course focused on a certain theme of heritage and culture and provided tangible examples of how that theme has deteriorated and/or been preserved—with readings, consultations with heritage stewards, and practical assignments in budgeting, project management, and grant-writing scaffolded to give us a nuanced understanding of the field.

As learners, the combination of practical assignments with the readings, lectures, and discussions provided the most well-rounded and immersive look into the world of cultural heritage stewardship that we could have asked for. Without question, lectures from the instructor and guest lectures are critical to this course curriculum. Our instructor explained information well, and her feedback on our assignments such as on our grant narratives was extremely helpful in creating a final grant narrative. She has been deeply committed to making this course both relevant to our professional development and scholarly interests. The result was a seminar class that was engaging, inspirational, and fun.

Grant writing and crafting grant proposals, particularly for cultural heritage stewardship initiatives, can be challenging given recent societal shifts that have and could continue to mark reduced funding for university research institutions. This course is unique as the instructor, who has obtained large grants and has a vast knowledge of the ideological leanings of philanthropic institutions, devotes time to reviewing student proposals and collaboratively discussing which funding agencies are most appropriate for our semester-long projects. For example, several of us initially wanted to pursue federal funding for proposals for community-centered project ideas. The professor noted that a private foundation recently issued a call for proposals that directly related to our ideas. We were instructed on ways we could proceed but were encouraged to perform our own research and make our own informed decisions. This course effectively balances instruction and individual research in a way that fosters creativity and enables students to create professional grant proposals that not only would further our research interests but also aid in writing grant proposals unassisted in our future careers.

In the Spring 2025 cohort, there was much anxiety from forces outside of our control—resulting in less time to adequately cover all course materials. Upheavals in the federal government meant that though we were focused on federal funding initially, we needed to switch gears quickly to identify private funding for our projects. Though this is just a real-world example of the stresses placed on library and museum institutions to get their important projects funded, there were times when we did not have enough time to cover everything else. A more deliberate discussion or synthesis about the readings amongst classmates and how it relates to our studies in grant writing and cultural heritage stewardship would have been beneficial. This could shed more light and different perspectives from other students who are further along in the program, with connections some of us may have missed.

Nonetheless, several of us felt that the openness of the course conversations provided immense value. Since the bulk of the course discussions are based on our interpretations and opinions of the course materials, we have many different perspectives. As a refugee who relocated to the United States at a young age, our instructor provided continual insights that not only broaden our views of cultural heritage but also serve as guides to identifying aspects of our own heritage and histories. Many of the topics that the guest lecturers wrote about and discussed were very niche, and we would likely have not stumbled on them in our own research avenues. Hearing different perspectives helps us understand the materials better, even if our opinions differ, just by getting us to think from another angle.

The lectures, field trips, discussions, and course activities all opened our eyes a wide range of cultural heritage stewardship applications and research opportunities, from investigating silences in archives and government records to identifying research opportunities and preservation concerns in worldwide archives. For example, one guest lecturer utilized archived historical newspapers to reveal societal roles, cultural norms, and links to significant events that most of us were entirely unaware of. The realization that so many aspects of cultural heritage remain hidden certainly motivated all of us to pursue investigative work in our own chosen arenas of LIS practice and research to develop a comprehensive grasp of the power dynamics in play at institutional and governmental archives. Because of this class, we now have a far richer history and context of cultural experiences that we can look to for research and inspiration.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Through autoethnography and co-authorship between students and faculty, we aim to model a non-extractive approach for conducting research on the impacts of LIS pedagogical practices. It is not lost on us that this project illustrates the limits of grant-funding for instituting wider change. However, we do strongly feel that the premature termination of funding for LAMP has not stopped it from catalyzing our faculty from working towards strengthening alternatives to unpaid LIS internships, including stipend programs and practicum waivers.

The lens of student participants illustrates both the benefits and limitations of direct class instruction and presentations. Through applying theoretical knowledge in practice, students can experience the full experiential learning cycle and have better understanding of theories and concepts learned from their classes. Hands-on, project-based education fosters students' professional and cultural competency skills. However, while experiential learning can develop students' cultural competencies, the burden of such training for specific populations should not

fall on internship sites alone. In the specific case of the LAMP fellowship, while faculty incorporated instructional materials that speak to the issues of the Latino community, their approaches were too broad to allow students to feel fully prepared to address the needs of Latino communities specifically.

Reflections from CHS course students reveal that empathy, critical thinking, creativity, and research skills are fostered through multiple instructional modalities and speakers that expose students to different points of view. We found this to be especially notable at the current historical crisis point for the US. Both student and faculty co-authors of this paper are cognizant of the importance of continuing on and working to better support the cultural heritage needs of underserved and marginalized communities, including of Latino communities who are facing persecution right now. Our findings show that even without federally funded fellowships, students can grow their cultural competencies and empathy for others through classroom-based learning that is rooted in a thoughtfully crafted cultural heritage stewardship curriculum.

Our findings also feed the growing recognition that cultural heritage pedagogy must address both interdisciplinarity and justice. Students not only require opportunities to engage in hands-on stewardship, but also need critical analysis tools to navigate the political and ethical contexts that shape archival and museum practice. Authority, neutrality, and access in archives are increasingly disputed in digital and community contexts (Duff & Harris, 2002; Gustavson & Nunes, 2023), and teaching these concepts poses additional challenges in cultivating embodied and affective understanding (Douglas, 2017). By embedding collaborative, justice-oriented pedagogy in cultural heritage stewardship, we seek to move toward sustainable models of education that resist the exploitation of students while strengthening interdisciplinary practice.

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