

Experiencing the Past: Teaching Public History with Impactful Collaborations

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It's a Friday morning during finals week of the fall semester, and one of my students exclaims "this is turning out so much better than I expected!" She is working with a team of classmates on installing an exhibition about women's history. This is the first time she has created an exhibition; it's the first time for most of my students. Hearing her delight and surprise is a fulfilling teaching moment and comes after extensive work and preparation. Researching, developing, creating, and installing exhibitions using archival materials is the final project for the public history courses I teach at my university. After spending the semester learning public history concepts through readings, lectures, guest speakers, class discussions, and hands-on activities, students begin the multi-week process of producing their own exhibitions.

Applying Experiential Learning to the Public History Class

Effective public history teaching requires a combination of theory and practice, and hands-on activities are vital for preparing emerging public historians for the profession. Collaborating with stakeholders both on and off campus offers valuable opportunities for students to learn about the field of public history and grow their skillsets. Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle is a powerful teaching model that provides a series of stages for students to be immersed in activities and reflect on their own learning. The cycle begins with concrete experience, where students are exposed to a hands-on activity early in their learning process. This is followed by reflective observation, where students are guided through writing and/or discussing their experience and what they learned, with an eye toward building on this initial experience. Abstract conceptualization follows reflective observation, where students build on what they've learned and their reflections by taking on a larger project or task. The Experiential Learning Cycle's fourth and final stage is active experimentation, where students are engaged in real-world applications of what they've learned through the cycle.¹

Literature Review

This approach to teaching public history using an experiential learning framework builds on the process written about by Jason Lustig, who argues for active learning and public engagement in the history classroom instead of the traditional lecture and research paper format to engage students in critical thinking and a deeper understanding of historical ideas.² Relatedly, Leeson et. al discusses incorporating experiential learning in the classroom in their article that grew out of a panel discussion sponsored by the *Sixteenth Century Journal*. The article talks about a variety of hands-on learning strategies. They also acknowledge the challenges instructors face when creating classes with experiential learning and note that these approaches often require trust from students and support from one's institution in the form of funding and flexibility. Instructors aiming to implement hands-on activities need to balance traditional, structured techniques and assignments with opportunities for creativity

1 David A. Kolb, *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*. (Prentice Hall, 1984).

2 Jason Lustig, "Active Learning and Public Engagement in the History Survey," *The History Teacher* 54, no. 4 (2021): 637-669. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27181294>

and experimentation.³ Edward J. Balleisen and Rita Chin also acknowledge the institutional barriers to experiential learning in their discussion about rigid approaches to pedagogy and curriculum structures. Nonetheless, they emphasize the importance of bringing experiential learning into the humanities classrooms because it helps students develop valuable career skills. Hands-on projects emphasize the relevance of what students are learning in the history classroom and provide a more engaging learning experience.⁴ Christopher B. Livingston discusses the public history collaboration between Walter Stiern Library at California State University, Bakersfield, and the History Department. While the student activities, which included research projects, exhibition installations, and archival processing, required extensive effort on the part of faculty, he argues it was worth it because it effectively engaged students and fostered connections between the campus and community.⁵

Like these educators, the Experiential Learning Cycle guides the structure of my public history courses and provides a framework for the collaborations I incorporate into the course to ensure student success and learning. I have developed a variety of partnerships for public history teaching including a campus museum, the university archives and special collections, a community art center, the local historical society, and an eighth-grade social studies class. Through these collaborations, students engage in meaningful experiential learning activities and develop relationships that will prepare them to work in the public history field. This article discusses these partnerships to illustrate how collaborations and experiential learning have been effective in teaching public history. My work builds on the argument made by David Coles and Deborah Welch, who emphasize the importance of projects that provide opportunities for students to gain experience while benefiting the community.⁶ This approach is supported by Rebecca Conard's argument that public history education has grown out of a pragmatic approach where public history projects serve both academic and community needs.⁷

Establishing Partnerships

Soon after beginning my position as assistant professor and coordinator of our public history program, I organized a public history advisory committee that included the director of our university's archives and special collections, the director of the local historical society, the director of the on-campus African American museum, faculty members from the university's MLIS program, two graduate student representatives, and history department faculty. I consulted with this group for ideas about how public history students could gain hands-on experience. I wanted to cultivate ideas for public history projects where students could serve the community and support public history initiatives that already exist on campus and in the community. This advisory committee shared exciting ideas about projects that had been done in the past that could be revisited such as living history tours on campus, as well as new needs in their organizations, like creating labels for exhibitions at the on-campus museum. We also formed an agreement with the MLIS faculty to allow their graduate students to take public

3 Whitney A.M. Leeson, James M. Ogier, Kathryn Brammall, Greta Grace Kroeker, Jennifer D. Selwyn, Myrna Ivonne Wallace Fuentes, Janis M. Gibbs, and Michael F. Graham, "Experiential Learning in and Out of the Classroom," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 46 no. 4 (2015): 1009-1032. <https://doi.org/10.1086/SCJ4604006>

4 Edward J. Balleisen and Rita Chin, "The Case for Bringing Experiential Learning into the Humanities," *Daedalus* 151, no. 3 (2022): 138-152. https://doi.org/10.1162/daed_a_01934

5 Christopher B. Livingston, "Imagined Spaces, Preserved Places: A Case Study of Historic Preservation through Applied Learning Environments and Service-Learning," *The American Archivist* 81, No. 1 (2018): 216-230. <https://doi.org/10.17723/0360-9081-81.1.216>

6 David Coles and Deborah Welch, "Bringing Campus and Community Together: Doing Public History and Longwood College," *The History Teacher* 35 no. 2 (2002): 229-235. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3054180>

7 Rebecca Conard, "The Pragmatic Roots of Public History Education in the United States," *The Public Historian* 37 no. 1 (2015): 105-120. <https://doi.org/10.1525/tph.2015.37.1.105>. The argument that public history education can benefit students and communities with service-learning and experiential learning projects that serve the community is also discussed in Carla Gerona, "Plan C for Curate: Teaching Studio History and Museum Studies in the Twenty-First Century," *The History Teacher* 53 no. 1 (2019): 37-66 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27058563> and Emily E. Straus and Dawn M. Eckenrode, "Engaging Past and Present: Service-Learning in the College History Classroom," *The History Teacher* 47 no. 2 (2014): 253-266. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43264227>

history classes, and public history students could take elective courses in the MLIS program. Working with this advisory committee was effective for ensuring that the coursework, class options, and internship opportunities I offered my students complemented the needs and existing work on the university's campus and in the community. It also created multiple avenues for public history students to pursue distinct paths in public history by tailoring their elective courses and internship positions.

Stage One: Concrete Experience

Field trips to local museums and cultural centers are an important part of my public history classes. Students need to learn how these sites operate, how they serve the public, and become familiar with how collections are displayed and managed. Field trips constitute the concrete experience phase of the experiential learning cycle in these courses. The significance of field trips is emphasized by Libby Bischoff because of the ways they expose students to local history. She argues that engagement in this way helps with retention and makes history feel more relevant and accessible to the students.⁸ I have taken my Introduction to Public History and Principles of Public History students to several museums and public history sites in our community. For example, we met with the director of our local historical society and learned about how they collect materials, how they handle research requests, how they document the history of the region, and the challenges their organization faces. The primary challenges of funding and staffing were important for students to hear about, because they are so common among historical societies, museums, and similar entities. Learning about how institutions address these challenges is crucial.

We also took a field trip to the local art center. This is not a site strictly dedicated to public history, but it was an important place for students to visit because the work they do there and the ways they serve the community are related to public history. They produce rotating art exhibitions that feature items from their permanent collection, items on loan, as well as shows dedicated to featured artists. The students met with the curator, and his description of the exhibition planning, development, and installation process was very similar to the work of public historians. The art center serves the community with various programming for all ages, and these types of offerings are also common to public history museums and organizations. The director shared the center's approaches to fundraising and community outreach, which correlates with what students could expect to experience when they enter the workforce. Furthermore, trained public historians could potentially expect to work at art centers and similar community organizations because of the connections and overlap among the arts and humanities, and because the training public historians receive is applicable at these places. In fact, the director informed students that a history graduate was employed on the center's small and active staff.

Stage Two: Reflective Observation

We followed both field trips with writing and discussion activities about the sites we visited. This is the reflective observation stage of experiential learning and allowed my students to process what they saw and heard about and then apply it to what they already knew about public history. We discussed and wrote in response to questions such as: "How is the site presenting content, ideas, and collections? Do you sense a bias in how these things are presented? How is the site funded? What type of impact do you think this has on their offerings and the work they do? How has visiting this site changed or reinforced your understanding of public history?" By engaging students in reflection and discussion about how ideas are presented and the potential impact of funding and bias on public history presentations, students are encouraged to think critically about the work they will produce. This prepares them for the abstract conceptualization stage of the experiential learning cycle, where they produce labels for public exhibitions in a museum setting.

⁸ Libby Bischoff, "The Lens of the Local: Teaching an Appreciation of the Past through the Exploration of Local Sites, Landmarks, and Hidden Histories," *The History Teacher* 48 no. 3 (2015): 529-559. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24810529>

Stage Three: Abstract Conceptualization

I teach a unit on writing exhibition labels in public history settings. We engage with this information through readings, lectures, and discussion to explore concepts such as accessibility, developing thesis-driven museum labels, and organizing labels into levels of information for the public. After this, students visit the on-campus African American museum. This museum grew out of a personal collection of artifacts and needed help revising and creating informational labels for the objects they have on display. The museum serves as a popular field trip destination for students of all grade levels. It also plays an important role on the university campus, since many classes visit the museum as part of their curriculum and the museum employs numerous students as interns and student assistants. Since the museum's holdings came from a private collector, the director identified a need for assistance from my students. The items' labels were inconsistent, and some were hard to read either visually or contextually. Some items did not have labels at all. This was a great opportunity to engage my students in real-world public history applications, since writing and rewriting these labels would contribute to public history already taking place on campus and in our community.

Collaborating with the museum's director, I tasked my students with writing new labels for objects that did not have them, and revising labels that needed improvement. This was the abstract conceptualization stage of the experiential learning cycle, where students applied what they learned in class and on field trips. Through this collaboration students were able to engage with the topic of writing exhibition labels more deeply and to apply what they read and discussed in class. They were immersed in what labels need to do in actual museum settings. An important guideline for writing exhibition labels is to ensure they are accessible to the general public so a variety of audiences can engage in museum exhibitions. The leading guidelines for museum exhibition labels advise to write them at an eighth-grade reading level. Even if visitors can read and understand college-level discourse, that doesn't necessarily mean that they want to do so while on a leisure outing and on their feet. Writing at an eighth-grade reading level does not mean "dumbing down" content or "talking down" to visitors, nor does it mean you can only write about topics learned in or before middle school. Rather, if you write at an eighth-grade reading level, you broaden the audience you reach and ensure your content is accessible for diverse visitors.⁹ We collaborated with a local eighth-grade class to ensure that the labels my students were writing and rewriting met this goal of being accessible for an eighth-grade reading level.

My public history class and the eighth-grade class each visited the museum on different days, and then each class reflected on what they saw and experienced. My students were each assigned two display items and, with a partner, tasked with rewriting or in some cases creating a new label for the items. After my students wrote a first draft of their labels, we shared them with the eighth-graders who provided feedback. The eighth-graders were asked to analyze the labels for clarity. What questions did they still have after reading the label? What was unclear? What did they want to know more about? Gathering feedback from eighth-graders was important for making sure the label language was accessible to the general public. Once the eighth-graders provided feedback, my students were tasked with writing a second draft that took the younger students' feedback into account. The younger students pointed out what areas were unclear, where they needed more context, and what questions they had about the topic after reading the labels. My students then revised their labels using this feedback to ensure that what they produced in the final draft of their labels was at an eighth grade reading level. These completed labels are now on display in the African American museum on campus.

This collaborative assignment provided benefits for the eighth-graders and for my students. The eighth-graders learned historical information that was researched and written by college students, and they were able to practice critical thinking and crafting effective questions. In addition to collaborating with the eighth-graders and the museum, my students collaborated with their partners in the class to research and write the labels, review and incorporate feedback, and then revise their writing to create finished products. This process is representative of the experience of curators and other public historians, who need to collaborate with numerous stakeholders on

⁹ Beverly Serrell, *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach*, (Rowman & Littlefield, 2015) and Jennifer Blunden, "The Sweet Spot? Writing for a Reading Age of 12," *Curator* 60 no. 3 (2017) 291-309. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cura.12205>

projects and be mindful of multiple audiences.

This was an effective activity, but it did present some challenges. As is so often the case in group projects, some classmate collaborations worked better than others. We had instances where some students did more work than their partners, which caused frustration. A couple of pairs actually submitted two different labels, suggesting they chose to eschew collaboration entirely. Also, while the eighth-grade feedback was useful for reminding my students to keep the label language clear and for pointing out references and context clues that could be lost on the general public, some of the feedback was less helpful. Reflecting the interest of a young person's mind, we had multiple instances where an eighth-grader would ask the types of questions they were presumably tasked with answering in a book report or other biography assignment in class such as who someone's inspirations were or other tangential questions. This information may be useful in a long form exploration, but for a museum label it can take things off topic and lead to overly long exhibition signage.

Stage Four: Active Experimentation

The labels assignment prepared students (and me) for the larger collaborative project that we engaged in later in the semester. My students' final project for their public history course was to research, develop, plan, and install an exhibition that goes on display in our university's library. The final exhibition represented the active experimentation stage of the Experiential Learning Cycle for the public history classes. This project enabled us to utilize the university's archival collections, highlight the existence and offerings of the archives, and have students produce real work that benefits and builds on the public history initiatives that exist at our university and in the community. My classes have produced exhibitions about civil rights and Black freedom movements, women's history, and World War II using materials from the university's archives and special collections.

Students worked on this project for several weeks, and they worked in teams. I selected the main topic and then divided students into groups that were each assigned a subtheme. For example, when the class created exhibitions about civil rights and Black freedom movements, one group focused on arts and culture, another on education, and a third group focused on leadership and activism—all within the larger topic of civil rights. Prior to the beginning of the project, I worked with archives staff to develop a list of potential items students could use from the archival collections. Students were then tasked with selecting objects from these lists to build their exhibitions. After making their selections, students conducted research and wrote labels that explained their topic and introduced the history they included in their exhibitions. They also created labels identifying and providing information about each item on display. Finally, the students worked in their teams to install the objects and labels to complete their exhibitions. This was the final assignment for the class and comprised a significant portion of their grade. The exhibition planning, development, and installation represented the active experimentation stage of the experiential learning cycle in the class.

Challenges

While providing valuable experience for the students and benefits for the library and university archives and special collections, the exhibition projects do present challenges. Some of these challenges have been overcome through changes I've made to the assignment and process, while others remain. As mentioned previously, team projects and group assignments consistently present challenges because there will almost always be some inequality in the distribution of work. Some students will take on more than others because of differences in personality, preparation, and motivation. I have tried to overcome this by having students assign specific tasks to members of their team, requiring multiple progress reports, assigning a reflection at the end where students assess their work and that of their teammates, and engaging with students during class time to ensure they are actively working on the project and allowing their teammates to contribute. Some other challenges are related to the exhibition contents. As a newer professor at the institution, I needed to quickly educate myself on the collections and local history in order to effectively lead my students. Furthermore, when working with the on-campus archive we were limited to their holdings. This has sometimes meant limited diversity in the items represented, and in

some instances, students wanted to talk about an event or idea in their exhibition but were unable to because there were not appropriate collection items for them to use. Finally, because we were using archival collections, they largely consisted of documents and photographs and were predominantly two-dimensional. Exhibitions that utilize multi-format materials and a combination of 2-D and 3-D objects are most engaging, so the nature of archival holdings places a limit on what students can produce.

Benefits

These challenges are outweighed by the powerful benefits that come with the project. Collaborating with archives provided major benefits for the students. They learned about how archives work by accessing the materials and spending numerous class sessions in archives to develop the exhibitions. They learned about proper handling of artifacts and archival materials, and handling these historical primary source materials made history come alive for them and inspired thoughtful discussion, critical questions, and impactful decision making. Students do the work of real public historians when they create exhibitions. This is an opportunity for them to learn firsthand what public historians do and gain experience they can use to help them find jobs. They finish the class with applicable skills. Working in archives provided exposure to the profession and enabled them to see the work of historians beyond teaching. The experience also allowed them to consider whether this is the type of job they would want to pursue after graduation. The students contributed to the needs of the campus and community by producing these exhibitions because they highlighted the university's archival collections in a visible space on campus which served as a form of advocacy for the archival program. By completing successful exhibitions, the students exceeded their own expectations and created something beyond what they thought they could. After producing their own exhibitions, students have developed a deeper appreciation for museum exhibitions and other public history projects they encounter. Finally, the students learned about their historical topics with the research and writing they conducted for the exhibition, which is always a goal for any type of history course.

Conclusion

Collaborating with the on-campus African American museum, the eighth-grade classes, the art center, the local historical society, and the university's archives and special collections resulted in assignments where the students' completed work contributed to existing public history initiatives. They engaged in real world applications of what they learned in class and provided a public demonstration of their competence. These opportunities made public history come alive for my students. Utilizing Kolb's experiential learning framework provided an effective structure for my public history courses where collaborations with entities and individuals on campus and in the community all worked toward building courses where students gained a meaningful understanding of the public history field and their own potential.

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