State of Hawaii Virtual Museum?

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The advent of digital technology provides for a much broader public access to museums' collections and interpretive knowledge. Such new technology, more importantly, enables museums to better meet their mission as institutions of public education. In this context, museums have begun their race to bring more people to their virtual domains, or better said, to take their virtual worlds into people's private homes endowing their public with tons of electronic data in forms of text and image. Museum *informatics* has provided the technologically advanced world with the ability to enter a museum's virtual domain, visit its collections, read its authoritative documents, and interact with its educational and occasionally entertaining programs from the comfort of one's home.

In the light of the above premise, I ask: How do major Hawaii museums rank in this growingly intense Internet race to providing access for, connecting to, and educating the largest user community possible? The prestigious Coudal Partners' *Museum of Online Museums*, on its homepage, displays (Doc. 1-3) a long list of all the museums the Partners find significant in advancing the worldwide online access to a wealth of scientific and cultural data. Skimming over the list, I search for our well-known museums in Hawaii, such as the *Honolulu Academy of Arts*, *the Contemporary Museum* (TCM), *Bishop Museum*, and the *Hawaii State Art Museum (HISAM)*. Sadly, I find no reference to our local museums in the Partners' reputable list.

This absence of presence could be a clue to a less-than enthusiastic online educational technologies in Hawaii. A cursory look at the current online educational programs and the

related technologies of the four local museums mentioned earlier and a recognized model museum, *Virtual Museum of Canada* (VMC), could perhaps provide my readers with some of the challenges that Hawaii museums are facing if they wish to join the competitive arena of the Online and global community of museum educators.

The rubric against which all these Online museums are measured to is the quality gauge of their innovative and interactive educational programs. It is the belief of this author that the key to a prudential Online education among museums is interactivity. Here I define *Interactive* as an electronic routine within an Online program whose flow and continuity requires the active participation of its users. In other words, one could be stuck onto an Internet page indefinitely, unless she actively and cognitively responds to a given question or command posed by the program. After the completion of the user's response, the interactive program advances to another page or level. This educational process, not always but very often, ends with the tabulation of correct and incorrect responses entered into the program by a user.

Interactive could also be compared to what John Dewy's educational philosophy would define as "hands-on learning experience." Dewy suggests that, "the principle of continuity of experience (as I would similarly define an interactive experience) means that every experience takes up something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after" (35). An experiencer or user of an interactive museum program, to insure the continuity of her experience, needs to take advantage of her previously learned knowledge to engage in responding to an interactive command. At the same time, she gains new knowledge from the outcome of her previous action to advance onto a new level of interactive challenges. This process, as Dewy would surely agree elevates one's learning experience.

During this past semester, we gathered that a museum's education department is one of its most important assets in initiating and maintaining a dialogue with its community. It is, therefore, of importance to those involved in our Museum Studies Certificate Program to have a clear idea of the challenges museum informatics could pose to their survival. *Museum informatics*, as defined by Paul Marty, "is the study of the sociotechnical interactions that take place at the intersection of people, information, and technology in museums" (3). Nevertheless, museum educators as Marty suggests need to keep up with their onsite and Online "information-savvy" visitors who are becoming increasingly more expectant.

Here, based on the American Association of Museums' (AAM) most recent Code of Ethics and within the theoretical frameworks of Eilean Hooper-Greenhill and John Dewey, I argue that museum education programs in Hawaii should soon invest more on innovative and interactive Online programs to avoid being labeled as merely a teachers' *sideshow.* This is an existence that is highly vulnerable to future budget cuts, and one that is easily replicable with the more cost-effective digital data collection and representation means, such as portable museum holographic and video tour projections.

In this light, I also argue that the move toward a broader and collective On-line presence is imperative to the survival of the institution of museums here in Hawaii. This is a move forward that requires the active participation of Hawaii's non-for-profit cultural institutions as well as the cooperation and financial support of our State's organizations for the advancement of science, culture, and the arts. A model of such cooperative network of non-profit museums and the governmental cultural organizations is the Virtual Museum of Canada (VMC), a national museum consortium that will be later discussed in this paper.

The AAM is clear on the broadening the scoop of what museums can and should do for their communities. Providing a broad range of access to museum collections, educating the public about their collections and the surrounding interpretations are only a few of the many museums' prescribed responsibilities. The most recent AAM's Code of Ethics for Museums begins with the following:

> "Museums make their unique contribution to the public by collecting, preserving, and interpreting the things of this world. Historically, they have owned and used natural objects, living and nonliving, and all manner of human artifacts to advance knowledge and nourish the human spirit. Today, the range of their special interests reflects the scope of human vision. Their missions include collecting and preserving, as well as, exhibiting and education with materials not only owned but also borrowed and fabricated for these ends." (Par. 2)

The Code also, in its sections on *collections* and *programs*, assigns to the museums, among others, the responsibility of making their collection*s* and program*s* accessible to the "widest possible audience" while educating the public with respect to "scholarship" that is marked by "intellectual integrity." AAM's Code of Ethics has become integral to the mission statements of nearly all American museum members. As a result, these museums have set their goals parallel to the Code and been working to achieve them through the means available.

Currently, one of the most pressing needs among our educational institutions, including museums, is the need to rapidly integrate digital technology into the fabric of our traditional educational settings. This goal is followed with the need to provide both the faculty and students with the skills they require to operate in such integrated educational environments.

Many of the required skills may be learned through exposure to the digital culture. Today, the presence of digital technology is sensed by nearly everyone who lives in America. People often purchase goods and communicate their telephone and e-mail messages On-line.

Similarly, they use the Internet to search and collect information, enroll and attend classes, while performing their work duties from the comfort of their homes. And, we know all this, because the American mass media floods our eyes and minds with images that evidence of the growingly easy-to-achieve digital culture with its highly popular appeal.

Furthermore, the hands-on and interactive qualities of the use of digital technology matched with its widely accepted and accessible presence are attractive to educators who find experience as the primary mean to education. "I assume that amid all uncertainties there is one permanent frame of reference: Namely, the organic connection between education and personal experience" (Dewey 25). John Dewey's philosophy on education as being the result of the synthesis between a transmitting referential source and the experiential interaction of a learner with the source currently is paramount to achieving a *progressive education* through the use of digital and interactive technologies.

"Progressive education," as Dewey explains, is the result of democratically arranged conditions that ultimately insure a greater accessibility to a shared experience for the largest segment of a population who is in the market for the most uplifting qualities of human experience (Dewey 34). When placed in a room while supervised by an educator who facilitates the tools of interaction and provides for guidance as to the quality of the outcome, learners begin to develop a series of habits. The learners' habits as to differentiating between what is accepted among their community as being better in quality to those of lesser significance insures the continuity and yet betterment of human experience (Dewey 35). "The principle of continuity of experience means that every experience both takes up something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after" (Dewey 35).

Dewey emphasizes the necessity of giving freedom of choice to learners who are engaged in the mechanics of a shared experience but carefully observing and evaluating all the possible outcomes. As a result, the educator needs to find and make educational experiences visible while making "mis-educative" experiences invisible. "The belief that all genuine education comes about through experience does not mean that all experiences are genuinely or equally educative" (Dewey 25). Dewey then explains that, "Any experience is mis-educative that has the effect of arresting or distorting the growth of further experience" (25).

Within Dewey's educational frameworks, digital technology is a must-have tool for museums and other educational institutions. Its readily informative and hands-on applications transcend the notion of a "classroom." As a result a shared experience may be virtually achieved in a domain where a multitude of people around the world interact with each other and with the virtual site itself while being fed a stream of relevant information by museum educators. In this virtual domain, learners have the necessary freedom that Dewey prescribes to experiment with the mechanics of virtual navigation and communication in great numbers.

In defining "communication as culture" and in the context of "Constructivist" philosophy of education, like Dewey, Eilean Hooper-Greenhill finds communication as integral to a culture when meaning is constantly constructed through a shared preferential system of thought. This culture could lose its healthy flow of social life and individual identity in the absence of the means to communicate. She goes as far as elevating the status of communication to a "secular ritual" whose process is no less possible without "sharing, participation, fellowship, and association" (Hooper-Greenhill 565).

One of the factors separating an experiential or constructivist model from that of the behaviourist's is in the way information flows and processes from one end to the other. In both experiential and constructivist models, as we have briefly discussed earlier, information is first introduced by a source (i.e. teachers, books, videos, internet sites, etc.) and then experimented with by a class of learners (students, site visitors, etc.), before it is deemed useful, significant, neutral, or completely, as Dewey puts it, "mis-educative." The constructivist's model gives more freedom to its community of learners to question and examine information and negotiate its boundaries while developing an interpretation of their own. In contrast, the behaviorist's model of education is authoritarian and definitive providing for a one-way transmission of information from a source onto its community of learners.

"Constructivists propose that knowledge is constructed through active interpretations of experience," professes Hooper-Greenhill. Then she continues, "Knowledge is not a single, self-contained body of facts that can be transmitted, unchanged, from one individual to another; knowledge is plural, and fluid, brought into being by the processes of knowing" (567). If the constructivist model is the ideal model for educating museum learners, then what are the challenges facing our museums today? After all, the constructivist model sounds like a slam-dunk solution to the need of broadening the learner-focused "culture of communication" in our museums. The quantitative aspect of this model demands a greater presence and democracy of users (or, learners), while its qualitative standards require an environment in which first-hand experiences of learners are shared, studied, modified and recycled. Furthermore, it emphasizes the importance of free expressions of conflicting opinions, cultures, and histories as corrective tools in the process of constructing meaning and sequencing of cultural values.

Incidentally, "Within constructivist theory any discussion of education focuses on the processes of learning rather than the processes of teaching. The role of the teacher is to provide stimulating environments for learning that take account of the existing knowledge of the learner, and that enable both the use of prior knowledge and the development of new knowledge" (Hooper-Greenhill 567). Here, "to provide stimulating environments for learning" is the key phrase that could profoundly impact the educational mission of our contemporary museums. By adopting the constructivist mindset, museum leaders acknowledge the dire need to further engage their local as well as other civic communities in their museums' programs. Mastering civic engagement, as Ellen Hirzy puts it, is a task "critical to museums' evolution, relevance, and survival" (10). "Museums are now, "becoming places of dialogue, advocates of inclusion, places of values, and incubators of community," (Archibald 5).

One of the tools that are today increasingly used by the museums to get their communities interested and involved is digital technology. During the last fifteen years, digital technology mainly because of its popular appeal, ease of use, ease of access, availability, and high-speed capabilities to store and process gigantic amount of information has become the darling tool of choice and symbol of progress in museums.

Digital technology has ubiquitously crawled its way into all aspects of our society forcing even the most technologically inapt members to learn its basic skills. For many, the minimum familiarity with digital technology has become a matter of social and professional do-or-die. Communities from all walks of life, in order to stay in the current of their society, need to know how to use a word-processing program, exchange e-mails, and surf the Internet. Many choose not to leave the comfort zone of their homes or offices and purchase whatever product they need

on the Internet. Everywhere one looks, in homes, schools, libraries, museums, stores, hospitals, and more, she finds computers and people who are using them to conduct their daily life activities. Nevertheless, for Dewey's idea of learning through experience, hands-on digital technology seems like a godsend with no parallel in sight. Perhaps since the invention of television and the mass media, no other medium of communication has been so successful in galvanizing the public around its presence.

A digital interactive program is an incredibly powerful learning tool of fusion and communication. It seems only natural for one to expect this new and powerful tool to be a part of our Hawaii museums' World Wide Web presence. Unfortunately, that is not the case.

With the exception of The Honolulu Academy of Arts, none of the other major museums in the State (Bishop Museum, TCM, and HISAM) has used any noticeable interactive educational program to attract and educate their often-young internet-savvy patrons. The sites are purely referential and informative. They merely contain Hyper Text Markup Links (HTML) and/or Portable Data Files (PDF) that are printable.

The Academy's only interactive program is buried in its *Education* site under the subcategory of *For Kids* (http://www.honoluluacademy.org). Here (Doc. 2), I find the *Fun Page*, where I can link to *Play The East Meets West Game Now*. The game requires its users to read a short paragraph about European explorers traveling to far reaches of the globe. To advance to the next stage of the game one has to click on the *Continue* link. After a brief introduction to some of the museum objects, the program prompts its user to a simple question often accompanied with a photograph of an object. Four answer choices appear that the user has to choose one of in order to advance to the next page. Both the correct and wrong answer

selected would take the user to an explanation passage about the topic. And, so continues *The East Meets West Game* while Baroque music delightfully plays in the background. The Game is designed for grades five through seven. Here, you have it: The only educational and interactive program on a local museum's website.

The public of today with its "information-savvy audiences" demands a lot more of museums and the displays of scientific-natural-cultural objects in their galleries. People seem to have a hunger for information, especially the kind that is up-to-date and fast. They especially appreciate digitally transmitted information that they can access at a place and time of their choosing. The public increasingly prefers to receive and communicate this information through a variety of user-friendly computers, cellular phones, I-Pods, and museum information consoles.

I, as a college teacher, can testify to the preferential and heightened use of digital technology in my classrooms. When my students were given the option to choose between writing a reaction paper on a handful of paintings by physically visiting a local art museum or writing about them by virtually looking at the reproductions shown on the museum's website, they all chose the latter. They increasingly recite Internet sources in their research papers; and, unless forced otherwise, a good majority of them prefer going Online instead of actually visiting a library or museum to complete their primary academic research.

Now, many of my students bring their laptop computers to class and use the available wireless capabilities to access On-line images and information to compliment our class discussions. In real time, and while in class, they e-mail me asking questions and commenting on the related topics of interest. Consequently, in most cases, I manage to respond before they leave the class or shortly after they had departed. At the heart of this enthusiastic application of

computers is a common explanation: They make people's lives easier to manage. It is true especially as in the case of the digital technology. It readily increases the volume and speed of finding, collecting, processing, managing, and communicating information. This list of learning and technological advantages used to be a wish list for many scholars, museum educators and alike; but, today the list is a celebrated reality.

Nevertheless, to better serve the public, museums and other educational institutions need to constantly update their equipments and staff their departments with personnel who are not only familiar with the information Technology (IT) but also those who are trained in museum studies and education programs. "Information and communication technologies in museums are changing so rapidly that most museums remain desperate for employees who can guide them through the basic technology hazards of planning digitization projects, purchasing collections information systems, or joining online data sharing consortia" (Marty 271). Marty and other museum informatics experts believe that finding such energetic, highly versatile and educated personnel may not be readily possible. They recommend, at least until museum informatics is a well-developed and established academic concept, the real focus should be placed on the technical training of the current museum professionals (273).

Granting that museums will have all the current technologies they need and the experts who operate them, then how exactly will museums live up to their goals as public educational institutions? Perhaps, I could answer this question by an example.

From the *Coudal Partners'* Online list (http://www.coudal.com/moom), I have selected the *Virtual Museum of Canada* (http://www.virtualmuseum.ca), or VMC, as an ideal to be used locally to advance the idea of Online museum education among our cultural institutions in

Hawaii. VMC is the result of a consortium of Canada's member museums and the Canadian government. A board of directors appointed by the participating members supervises the site's content and quality. Every member institution has at least a VMC liaison officer who contributes in the maintenance of the site (http://www.virtualmuseum.ca/English/About/index.html).

This collaborative model may also work well for our Hawaii museums and historical conservation institutions. These non-profit entities could join forces with HISAM and related State endowment organizations to form a consortium of Hawaii cultural institutions working toward a shared virtual presence. The hypothetical title for the proposed consortium's virtual presence could be, *Virtual Museum of Hawaii*. This online museum could then be funded, staffed and maintained, similarly to the VMC's format, by a liaison officer chosen by its member institutions.

The strength of VMC is in its easy to follow flow and interactive programs. After an Online visitor is asked to choose from the two official Canadian languages, English or French, as her primary mean of communication, she is then Welcomed to eight gateways. Running my mouse over every color gate (http://www.virtualmuseum.ca/English/index_flashFT.html), I choose *Teachers' Center Resources*. Here, teachers are given a multitude of options including the *Agora* learning program, self-designed lesson plans, games, and videos that are mainly interactive (An in-depth study of the content here is simply beyond the scoop of this paper.).

Back to VMC's gateways, I find especially the *Fun and Game*, as well as, *Personal Museum* gateways of special interest pertaining to the subject of this paper: Museums and interactive learning. The *Fun and Game* gateway consists of nearly one hundred and fifty games that are often engagingly entertaining. They are designed for different age groups and levels of

competencies. All of the MVC games have interactivity as an integral in their game plan. On occasions, an Online user may be given some feedback as to her performance and then she would be coached to advance through the game. More than half of the games end up with a quiz focusing on the material discussed. The remaining half highlight the most important points in the game and then ask the user to organize the highlighted points in either their chronological order of appearance in Western history or their order of appearance in the game itself. Other variations of these two reordering and sequencing processes also exist.

Likewise, in our, theoretically speaking, Virtual Museum of Hawaii (VMH), data-specific games could be designed based on our locality, indigenes culture, outside forces influencing Hawaii, labor, Immigration, Hawaiian culture influencing others, etc. High-definition images of our museum collections could be acquired and displayed not only to provide for virtual exhibitions, but also to feed into the process of the games. The prospect of people from all over the world visiting VMH, playing its interactive games, and possibly learning about our life here on the islands is truly enchanting.

Continuing my visit to the Canadian museum, I return to VMC's gateways; there I click on *My Personal Museum* link. As it is the case with nearly all the pages, I find a brief explanation of what the link is about. Here, I read, "My Personal Museum is your space to collect, interpret and exhibit. Create your own personal museum around a theme, and artist, or your favourite objects. It's also great for school projects." The text continues, "Simply login to start adding your favourite objects and artifacts to your very own space!" The three active links on the page are: *Creative*, *Change*, and *Display*. As a new user, I sign up for my free membership and access to the community of the Virtual Museum individuals. Using my

password I can always log into my personal museum site and change my data and its order of exhibition. The site could become an exhibition of my cultural interests and priorities or, in theory at least, a universal spectacle of my talent in the arts and/or sciences.

A virtual museum of Hawaii could just as well follow the footsteps of the Canadian model or choose a new Online model of its own. It is, however, an undeniable fact that having access to a series of fun and thought-provoking programs at all times and from any location in the world is a proposition that one can hardly refuse.

The opportunities at hand are numerous, and Hooper-Greenhill has articulated this fact perfectly. Therefore, I wish to bring this paper to a close with her following quote:

> "Museums are at a point of change. The possibility of cultural re-opening, of reinterpretation, of re-negotiation, is deeply exciting. Museums today have the opportunity to push at existing borders, to change current relationships, to manipulate and break down old orthodoxies, to enable a broader, more inclusive approach to a more inclusive society. Through developing their communicative functions in creative and innovative partnerships with their audiences, art museums can become vital new institutions for the 21st century." (573)

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