

Museum Studies as Critical Praxis

Developing an Active Approach to Research, Teaching and Practice

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Standfirst: This article proposes a new model of museum studies as critical praxis. I argue that rather than critiquing established practice, museum studies and associated academic fields need to take a more active approach and 'do' something. An argument that is evidenced through two case studies which test a design thinking based model of critical praxis pedagogy.

Key words: Museum studies, critical praxis, design thinking, practice based research, pedagogy, action research

This article presents a research journey centred on addressing the question: should museum studies as a discipline be concerned with recording and critiquing established practice, or should its focus be on influencing positive and progressive change within the sector? What follows is a critical examination of how museums and universities as both institutions and individual professionals engage, work and collaborate with each other. Considering established thinking on practice based research and research dissemination, this paper advocates the use of design thinking as a methodology for museums studies as critical praxis. Through two case studies situated at the Ulster Museum and Wellcome Collection, this paper concludes by demonstrating that a clear methodological framework for critical praxis can foster a move towards practice as research, and research as practice, which is mutually beneficial to both academics and museum practitioners.

Context

As both an academic and practitioner the challenges of differing pressures and workplace expectations in both museums and academia have been evident to me for a number of years. Indeed, from conversations with peers in both sectors it is apparent that there is often a baseline misunderstanding of each other's perspectives and motivations. When I first began my own PhD research I found many former colleagues in the cultural sector opening up about why they found it difficult to work with universities and academics. Relevance was a reoccurring theme; there was a view that academics use 'fancy language' but don't actually know what it's like to work on the 'front line'. An obvious counterargument to this viewpoint is of course that museum and arts professionals are often not aware of the pressures of working in modern academia, and perhaps it is contradictory pressures and work cycles that create this tension between academia and industry (in this instance the museum sector). As such this paper looks at models of critical praxis within a UK context. This geographic scope has been defined because the higher education, and museum sector operating environments within the UK play a major role in shaping museum studies and museum practice within this context. Lehmann and Werner

argue the need for a shared practice-based methodology to overcome ‘a biased gap between theory and practice, where knowledge production and theoretical reflections by academia tend to be divided from practical tasks of the museum’s operational spheres of display and exhibition.’ⁱ Indeed it is the transition from thinking about practice to becoming practitioners that many museum studies graduates find difficult, particularly within the competitive job market that exists in the museum sector today. Critical praxis brings the spheres of both theory and practice together, and as such presents a theoretical framework from which to challenge such tensions.

Language and publication platforms are another recurring theme that emerged in a number of such conversations, and when we take a step back and look at the research outputs of many academics, which exist only in pay walled journals (although admittedly this is something that is beginning to change), then it is not surprising that some museum professionals are unfamiliar with the work of ‘important’ museum studies academics. These informal conversations led to an ongoing investigation into the relationship between museum studies as an academic discipline and museum practice itself. The foundation of this paper is a literature review of existing work that examines the interplay between museums and universities in developing practice based research and teaching. This literature and analysis of existing practice, forms a critical foundation from which two action research projects are developed. The first project, took the form of a 12 hour hackathon at the Ulster Museum; and the second a 3 hour digital skills workshop at Wellcome Collection. Each of these projects takes an iterative methodology to developing and testing scalable approaches to critical praxis pedagogy, which could be used by academics in a range of teaching environments. The aim of such an approach is to support students in the transition from thinking about practice, to becoming practitioners themselves, practitioners who are active, engaged and innovative change makers and leaders within the museum context.

Theory vs. practice

Whilst there are many recognised and widely accepted definitions of a museum the definition of museum studies as an academic discipline is perhaps more nuanced. A traditional understanding of museum studies as an academic discipline is that of a broad academic area of inquiry, which seeks to identify, record and critique the culture of museums and their working practices. The primary aim of such an approach (which could be defined as critical museologyⁱⁱ) is not to catalyse timely change, but is instead designed to broaden the wider body of knowledge on the complex, political and biased nature of the social construct that we today know as the museum. Shelton provides a helpful definition when he introduces ‘critical museology’ to the wider conversation on the role and purpose of museology. In his work he makes a distinction between intellectual curiosity ‘critical museology’ and operational practice within museum studies, an observation that is built on over 25 years working as an academic within this area.ⁱⁱⁱ

The aim of museum studies (and the associated programmes that emerged from it) as an academic discipline was to provide students with a well-rounded education, with students using this training as a means to gain an entry-level position in a museum from where they would begin to develop technical skills.^{iv} Peter H. Welsh, Director of Museum Studies at the University of Kansas argues that a singular approach to theorising museums is problematic, because museums are operational and active institutions. Welsh observes that it would be ‘far less messy if museums...existed in a world of ideas and concepts’ however the reality of museum work is much more practical from managing loans to visitors.^v Conversations around the academic vs. technical practices undertaken within museums studies research and teaching are not new. In *The Development of Museum Studies in Universities: From Technical Training to Critical Museology*, Jesus-Pedro Lorente, Professor of Art History at the University of Zaragoza, notes that Raymond Singleton, the founder of the School of Museum Studies at the University of Leicester, preferred ‘museum studies’ rather than ‘museology’ because he ‘detested the endless debates on the theory of museology’.^{vi} Singleton advocated a technical training, and Lorente notes the irony in this position, as the School of Museum Studies is now recognised as a world leader in academic research on the museum, its collection and audience, rather than as a centre for technical training for the sector.^{vii} While the School of Museum Studies at Leicester was established in 1966, museum studies programmes did not develop in America until the 1970s and 1980s.

In addressing this ‘theory vs. practice dichotomy’ Suzanne MacLeod, Professor of Museum Studies at the University of Leicester, takes a broader view of museum studies and incorporates the ‘complex web of relationships and working practices which currently characterise museum studies’^{viii} into a new conceptual model. The model developed by MacLeod presents the idea of museums studies as a forum, rather than a purely academic pursuit. Her model incorporates a broad range of activities from education to museum practice and sees each as integral to the continued development of the museum studies discipline (figure 1).^{ix}

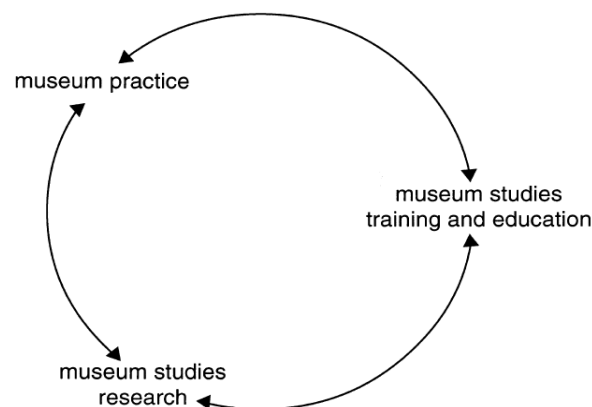


Figure 1: Conceptual Model for Thinking about Museum Studies. From: Suzanne MacLeod, ‘Making Museum Studies: Training, Education, Research and Practice’ *Museum Management and Curatorship* Vol 19: 1 (2001) p. 51

Like MacLeod, Lynne Teather also places an emphasis on the relationship between research, education and practice, and suggests that museum studies should move away from global studies of museums (museology) towards more specific research on 'internal and external operations and management' (museum studies).^x Whilst recognising the value of museological critique, Teather advocates the need for museum studies as a discipline to value 'the everyday' skills and expertise required to run a museum: 'It is the combination of the museum process and museum skills that frames the field of museum studies'.^{xi} MacLeod developed this conceptual model to provide a more valid understanding of the role of museum studies, which she sees as having 'an active role in the redefinition of the museum over the last three decades'.^{xii} MacLeod's *Conceptual Model for Thinking about Museum Studies* moves long standing arguments about theory and practice forwards towards a more iterative model, which portrays museum studies as an evolving discipline shaped in equal parts by training and education, research, and museum practice.

The work of Etienne Wenger on 'Communities of Practice' is highlighted within MacLeod's paper as a means to support the argument that rather than competing, those involved in museum studies: teaching, practice and research can benefit from working together.^{xiii} Wenger defines Communities of Practice, as mutually beneficial learning communities, groups of people who share a similar drive, or motivation to develop themselves and or the organisation in which they work. MacLeod uses this learning theory as the basis of her conclusion, in advocating:

A recognition of museum studies as training and education, research and practice, and as an area of enquiry made meaningful through participation and collaboration enables us to recognise museum studies as an integral aspect of the current museum scene one which can make a valuable contribution to the shaping and placing of museums in contemporary society.^{xiv}

It is probably fair to say that museum studies programmes, like museums themselves, have changed radically in the last 10 years, with a greater focus on employability and skills-based training. However, like museums, museum studies programs must continue to adapt if they are to prepare young professionals for the ever changing, ever more complex policy context in which museums operate.

Museum studies and methodological inventiveness

Taking the stance that museum studies should be a people-orientated discipline made up in equal parts by museum practice, training and education, and research this paper seeks to adopt and adapt action research methods to create a model of museum studies as critical praxis. Methodological inventiveness, the creation of new research methods or altering of existing methods, is an established practice within education and healthcare, particularly within action research projects where such methods support the development of solution-based research outcomes. This approach empowers both practitioners and service users to design solutions to problems and support the 'subsequent development or implementation activities'.^{xv}

Dadds and Hart are interested in research from a practitioner or service user perspective, rather than that of an academic or academic institution. They outline the value in the following approach:

Practitioner research methodologies are with us to serve professional practices. So what genuinely matters are the purposes of practice that the research seeks to serve, and the integrity with which the practitioner researcher makes methodological choices about ways of achieving those purposes. No methodology is, or should be, cast in stone, if we accept that professional intention should be informing research processes, not pre-set ideas about methods or techniques.^{xvi}

For museum studies to truly become a discipline grounded in critical praxis the pedagogy that supports this model needs to be realistic, scalable and deliverable. As a means to explore how this approach could tangibly be realised, two action research projects were carried out between 2012 and 2016 with students at the University of Ulster and Richmond the American International University in London. The first project, took the form of a 12 hour hackathon at the Ulster Museum; and the second a 3 hour digital skills workshop at Wellcome Collection. This paper will now explore each of these case studies in turn as a means to share new models for critical praxis pedagogy, which could be adopted and adapted by those working at the intersection of academia and museum practice.

1: Prototyping Museum Studies as Critical Praxis at the Ulster Museum

Elise Dubuc examines the purpose of museum studies in *Museum and University Mutations: The Relationship Between Museum Practices and Museum Studies in the Era of Interdisciplinarity, Professionalisation, Globalisation and New Technologies*. In this article she poses the question: are we teaching in order to reproduce the status quo, or in order to effect change?^{xvii} A provocation that helped provide a theoretical framework for designing an action research project that could explore the possibility of museum studies students effecting change within the museum sector.

The Northern Ireland Museum sector was slow to respond to digital technologies. In 2012 the only dedicated 'digital' post in any museum in Northern was that of the web marketing manager at National Museums Northern Ireland. Through informal conversations, museum staff, and strategic partners repeatedly cited three key reasons as to why museums in Northern Ireland had at that point shown little interest in developing a more holistic approach to digital engagement with visitors. The reasons cited by museums professionals were: a lack of money, staff, and skills.

Having spent two years researching digital practice in museums internationally, we (myself and Alan Hook, Lecturer in Interactive Media Arts, University of Ulster) recognised that a lack of an already existing infrastructure could possibly be a positive thing as it would not restrict production methods and would mean that the Museums have no fixed agenda, policy documents or time scale that projects needed to speak to. Furthermore and key to the proposed model of critical praxis,

this platform provided us with the opportunity to use critical praxis as a means to deliver research, teaching and practice. This context became the foundation for our action research project that sought to develop a pedagogical approach that would facilitate critical praxis, influence change within the sector and help us to develop more confident, and critical engaged students.

Developing an active research methodology

Rather than being driven by academic expectations (which could be called critical museology), and established methodologies, the critical praxis pedagogy proposed in this paper takes a more 'inventive' approach to developing research methods. Rather than relying on research or teaching methods that carry the most academic weighting or precedence, methodological inventiveness, risk and innovative approaches designed to respond to the challenges that exist within the museum sector are utilised. Dadds and Hart speak of the need to create conditions, which facilitate and encourage 'methodological inventiveness':

If our aim is to create conditions that facilitate methodological inventiveness, we need to ensure as far as possible that our pedagogical approaches match the message that we seek to communicate. More important than adhering to any specific methodological approach, be it that of traditional social science or traditional action research, may be the willingness and courage of practitioners 'and those who support them' to create enquiry approaches that enable new, valid understandings to develop; understandings that empower practitioners to improve their work.^{xviii}

Central to Dadds and Harts argument is the need to develop pedagogic practices that support risk, as risk is an essential component for the development of methodologically inventive research methods. Fitzpatrick also writes about the need to 'make sure someone's got your back'.^{xix} In *Do 'the Risky' Thing* she talks about the challenges facing early career academics that seek to use new technologies and novel methods of research. In this article she talks about how 'digital scholars run the risk of burnout from having to produce twice as much traditional scholarship and digital projects as their counterparts do'.^{xx} Her advice is that such methods can only really be developed or implemented if researchers know 'that their senior colleagues will learn to evaluate new kinds of work on its own merits and will insist upon the value of such innovation for the field and for the institution'.^{xxi} The challenge for those not in an environment that encourages or supports risk is to innovate in order to achieve social change within accepted parameters. Working within this institutional academic context we developed an action research project which was delivered through two event formats, the first a 3-hour digital crash course and the second a 12-hour hack day. The format was designed to be delivered within a semi structured environment, and was situated within exiting taught modules. What follows is an account of that workshop, which is deliberately detailed to allow for replication and use by other academics but also links to the wider argument about what critical praxis could like within the museum studies disciplines.

Cultural Heritage and Museum Studies 'Digital Crash Course'

Students on the MA in Cultural Heritage and Museum Studies attended a 3 hour 'Digital Crash Course' workshop as part of their Cultures of Curatorship module. This crash course started with a 1 hour lecture on digital practice in museums, and briefly introduced best practice examples of social media, digital engagement, and linked data. After a lecture that provided students with a contextual benchmark, students broke into small groups and were tasked with developing creative and alternative solutions to a number 'design challenges'. Students were provided with challenges such as:

The Ulster Museum would like visitors to engage on social media platforms, and to visit their website as a follow up to their tangible museum visit. The museum would like to develop an intervention in their entrance to encourage people to engage with them online. They want visitors to be excited by what they have to offer online. What could the museum do to encourage visitors to engage with them online?

At the start of the activity students were intimidated by the large sheets of blank paper, and hesitant to note down ideas, 'in case they weren't right'. Museum people love facts and certainty, so to, do museum studies students it seems, writing down new ideas, and challenging established practices was something many in the group had never done before. It was interesting that students got really involved in heated debate about new ideas and approaches to responding to the design challenges – but found it difficult to translate conversations to paper. If they put their ideas on paper they became 'official' and this was more difficult than simply pitching ideas in conversation. To start groups off a number of ideas were added to their sheets of paper and this encouraged each group to add to what had been started, which seemed more attainable than starting on a blank page. By the end of this Digital Crash course there was real energy and students began to see that they already had a range of digital literacy skills from their personal lives that could transfer into 'professional' digital literacy in a museum context.

Developing a hack day format

In a similar vein to Dubac, Handel Kashope Wright advocates changing the question all together; rather than ask, 'what is cultural studies?', we need to ask the more active, even potentially activist question, 'what does cultural studies do?'^{xxii} Like museum studies, cultural studies is a broad, interdisciplinary field of research and as such it is difficult to define beyond an interest in explicating systems of cultural value. Instead of focusing on a definition, Wright places the emphasis on the impact that cultural studies can have on society from influencing policy to vocational practice. MacLeod's work is a useful framework for understanding the processes involved in driving museum studies as a discipline. If we want to facilitate the creation of a broader museum studies discipline, one that extends beyond our universities, then perhaps, as Wright advocates in cultural studies, museum studies too, must take a more active approach. Rather than simply critiquing established practice, museum studies needs to 'do' something. The idea of 'doing' something helped to bring our action research outside the walls of the university into a museum to form the second part of this action research project, a hack day at the

Ulster Museum. With participants for this event drawn from the MA in Cultural Heritage and Museum Studies, and BA (hons) in Interactive Media Art.

Through the hackathon we sought to test this hypothesis that museum studies as a discipline should be in a position to influence change and 'do' something. However in terms of what doing something looked like, we decided against asking students to pitch their hacks to museum staff. We felt that a concluding pitch would put restrictive pressure on students, who were seeking opportunities to impress and stand out within the small and tight knit museum sector. Instead we sought to create an environment that supported risk, and challenged existing practices and policies. As such whilst this event took place in the museum it was done so as a private event not a formal partnership.

Wright explores the difficulties facing academics who operate within an interdisciplinary context and expresses an interest in 'the split between the university and academic work on the one hand and political, activist and performative work in the community and society on the other'.^{xxiii} For Wright, experience and identity are central to his work as an academic: they influence the research that he undertakes, and determines the choices made within that research. Rather than being an objective observer of cultural practice, Wright argues the validity in acknowledging the nuances of the individual within his research.^{xxiv} Working outside the institution provided opportunities for students to think as individuals, rather than from an institutional perspective.

Wright argues that it is important for academics that seek to influence change to disseminate their research in a means that is accessible to those that they are researching.^{xxv} This presented a challenge because by not working with the museum our ability to influence direct change was limited, however the approach that we took created the opportunity for us to inspire students to become what Bolter refers to as a hybrid, a new media critic that 'wants to make something, but what she wants to make will lead her viewers or readers to reevaluate their formal and cultural assumptions'.^{xxvi}

The Hack Day began with a short icebreaker session, after which participants were split into interdisciplinary teams of four (with participants drawn from both the Undergraduate Interactive Media Arts and Postgraduate Cultural Heritage and Museum Studies). During the morning we held two short sessions, the first led by Alan Hook looked at the concept of play and game mechanics; the second session led by myself explored participatory design in museums. Each group was tasked with creating interactive experiences that question the notion of play in the museum. The task was deliberately loose, rather than tell students what we wanted them to create, we wanted them to show us what was possible. The only required outcome was a project blog (on Tumblr), which had to outline their team's hack, and any prototype media they had produced during the event. With this approach we sought to empower students to think like practitioners, and seek to improve rather than replicate existing professional practices that exist in museums.

Creating a dialogue between established and emerging research methods

Romme suggests that 'scholars adopting the humanities mode intend to portray, understand and critically reflect on the human experience of actors inside social practices...all knowledge arises about from what actors think and say about the world'.^{xxvii} In essence, this academic approach, which we could describe as 'museum studies research' within MacLeod's model, would focus solely on empathising and defining a situation, but would stop short of taking action.

Romme proposes three 'archetypal modes' of research: science, humanities, and design. Science is concerned with finding and explaining trends. Humanities is interested in understanding and reflecting upon the human condition. While, 'the design mode...focuses on producing systems that do not exist—either by changing existing social practices and situations into desired ones or by creating new practices from scratch'.^{xxviii} We saw the archetypal modes of research as defined by Romme emerge within in the teams on the day, and the challenges of interdisciplinary research and practice became evident very quickly.

Each team responded to their brief in a different way, but across each we noticed a disciplinary distinction. Those from a museums background were concerned with facts, and accuracy, whilst those with advanced digital skills wanted to ideate, the more ideas, and the crazier they were the better. Some teams revelled in the challenge to find a common ground, while others found this more difficult. A key challenge during the event was fostering positive team dynamics, and negotiating compromises. One group argued for an hour about factual accuracy and which one of their initial ideas would be best to prototype; we intervened and explained that as emerging museum professionals they will have to work with designers, and as designers they will have to work with clients. This example demonstrated the need for emerging museum professionals to work outside their own discipline, as this provides opportunities to develop professional skills. It also provided students with the opportunity to discuss digital culture, changing media production trends, and how this was creating a new operating environment for museums. This conversation centred on critical praxis, and empowered students to develop new modes of practice.

Indeed, this clashing of perspectives demonstrates the differing theoretical perspectives which students on a range of courses come from before they even begin to explore how theory meets practice in a professional context. As such we need to consider how critical praxis can help students to navigate theoretical and discipline specific language, theory and practice.

One team created a particularly strong, and functioning prototype: a QR Code video ghost tour of the museum. The video prototype featured Takabuti, a female Egyptian mummy, played by a male participant who dressed himself up in fabric rags. Some participants took issue with the factual inaccuracies while others in their group were able to confidently explain the term 'proof of concept' and 'rapid prototype' to their teammates. Another group defined the 'no photography policy' as a challenge for

them as young creatives. This team chose to work around the no photography rule and create an alternative audio tour of the museum, as a means of demonstrating how museums can work with, rather than prohibit creatives. The group negotiated this rule by taking wide-angle gallery images for their blog, with their rationale being that copyright wouldn't be infringed as the paintings would not be the main feature in their photographs. This group also produced a viable prototype—a 1960s era radio show—which featured music and news from the decade, and also made reference to objects that featured in paintings on display in the exhibition. The group explained:

The project started off from the generic idea that art can be intimidating for some visitors and that ice-breaking activities could encourage a more relaxed engagement with art. It also developed as an alternative to the traditional descriptive and self contained audio tour format. The theme of the exhibition, stressing the sixties as a decade of revolt and innovation, spurred us to challenge the conventions of visiting museums and engaging with art...The period is certainly best remembered for its music. We used it as an entry point into the gallery as visitors are likely to relate to it in some way or other. The use of music is relevant from a learning point of view as it helps recreate the atmosphere of the time and of the creative process. It is also likely to trigger memories or emotions with visitors, hopefully encouraging deeper interaction and a few boogie steps.^{xxix}

The simplicity of concept, and materials for this project was striking. It is the type of playful interaction that could be thought up, prototyped and implemented in one afternoon. It is important to note at this juncture that participants in this Hack Day wanted to use platforms they were familiar with—for example, no one suggested creating alternative interpretation panels. Instead participants used platforms such as YouTube, Tumblr, Vimeo, Facebook and Soundcloud. This demonstrates that leading with a challenge, rather than a brief with a predefined outcome encourages students to think beyond existing practice, and allows them to bring new platforms, languages and ways of working to the table.

Participants wanted to use contemporary culture as an underlying narrative to the digitally mediated responses they created. They wanted to relate the museum to themselves, and the world around them; they didn't care about policy, instead they wanted to make people laugh, stop, stare and question. Whilst it is right for museums to uphold accuracy as the cornerstone of museum practice, the emergence of visitor appropriation of collections is becoming endemic.^{xxx} Working with emerging museum professionals and digitally engaged visitors provides museums with a valuable opportunity to respond to this emerging trend.^{xxxi} The relationship between hacks and established museum practices is something that teams reflected on when presenting their hacks to each other.

As with all Hack Days, the dialogue and debate that took place on the day was more valuable than the project outcomes themselves. Participants gained valuable professional skills, and the interdisciplinary nature of this project replicates more

accurately the nature of the museum workplace than a classroom ever could and is an example of the shared practice-based methodology advocated by Lehmann and Werner.^{xxxii} Emerging museum professionals are often bursting with ideas and enthusiasm. They bring with them fresh, culturally relevant insight that can sidestep museum bureaucracy, dismantle a problem and find a solution. In short, they can balance theory and practice, and negotiate a pathway between the two.

2: Responding to Design Challenges at the Wellcome Collection

In October 2015 students on the MA in Visual Arts Management and Curating at Richmond University participated in a digital workshop at the Wellcome Collection, a workshop that was jointly led by myself, Danny Birchall, then Digital Manager and Russell Dornan, then Web Editor. This 3 hour workshop sought to introduce the concept of digital practice in museums to students for the first time, but also to get them to think critically and practically about the role of managing and creating digital products in a museum environment. The 3 hour workshop sought to refine and combine the 15 hours of contact time delivered in the Ulster Museum example into a smaller scale model of critical praxis. The initial case study represented a significant body of work, but for critical praxis to become a successful and inherent approach to museum studies teaching, research and practice, then a more streamlined, lighter touch and less resource intensive method is required. As such this second action research case study sought to examine how critical praxis could be enacted through a single taught session.

A key difference was that this workshop was delivered entirely in a museum environment (rather than a classroom or university environment), and was delivered in partnership with museum staff. In terms of refining the Ulster Museum project into a shorter but equally effective method of enacting critical praxis I turned to existing research on design thinking.

Design thinking a framework for museum studies as critical praxis

Design thinking describes the use of 'design' principles to solve problems, an approach that is long established within design circles. It has more recently been brought to wider use as a framework for problem solving in areas such as business, service design, education and healthcare. Brown, a proponent of design thinking and director of IDEO, an award winning global design firm, describes it as 'a human-centred approach to innovation that draws from the designers toolkit to integrate the needs of people, the possibilities of technology, and the requirements for business success'.^{xxxiii} The term was popularised by the 1991 book *Design Thinking* by Paul Rowe, in which he explored the use of design thinking within architecture.^{xxxiv} Since this publication, Lindberg argues that design thinking, has emerged into a 'meta-discipline'. He cites, for example, the emergence of new courses and schools devoted to teaching design thinking to non-designers in both America and Europe.^{xxxv} Design thinking started out as 'an open concept to describe a designer's cognitive strategies of problem solving' and has now become more formalised.^{xxxvi}

Lindberg outlines three steps that are common across the numerous approaches to design thinking, namely:

- Illumination of the problem space;
- Illumination of the solution space;
- Iterative alignment of spaces.^{xxxvii}

This triple matrix of problem, solution, refinement takes as its central premise, that nothing is ever finished. When a solution to the initial problem has been found, that solution can, through testing always be refined. This premise of never finished, forms the thinking behind the highly shared, *Done Manifesto*. Developed by Bre Pettis (CEO of MakerBot, a company that produces 3D printers), The Done Manifesto, challenges us to move away from perfection, or more accurately to 'Laugh at perfection. It's boring and keeps you from being done'.^{xxxviii} Perfection, and the development of finished products (be they academic papers or exhibitions) is something that academics and museum professionals are both endlessly in the pursuit of. However design thinking challenges us to work within the parameters of what Simon calls 'perpetual beta'.^{xxxix} Nothing is ever finished, and everything can always be refined.

Recognising that design thinking can 'be seen as a grounding framework for multidisciplinary teams to communicate and to coordinate activity',^{xl} Gestwicki and McNely examine a number of Design Thinking Frameworks, in order to arrive at one suitable for use within museums. Specifically, their research looks at how design thinking principles can aid the development of educational museum games, and explore how the design thinking principles could provide a framework from which museum professionals can depart from their pursuit of perfection. Gestwicki and McNely acknowledge the work of Aspelund,^{xli} Brown,^{xlii} and Poulsen and Thorgersen^{xliii} in developing useful models of design thinking. Whilst each of these cited authors present models of varying degrees of complexity, they all display the three common areas identified by Lindberg, namely: problem, solution and prototype. However Gestwicki and McNely set apart the work of Kembel as being particularly useful within the context of museums as his model places a strong emphasis on empathy.^{xliv}

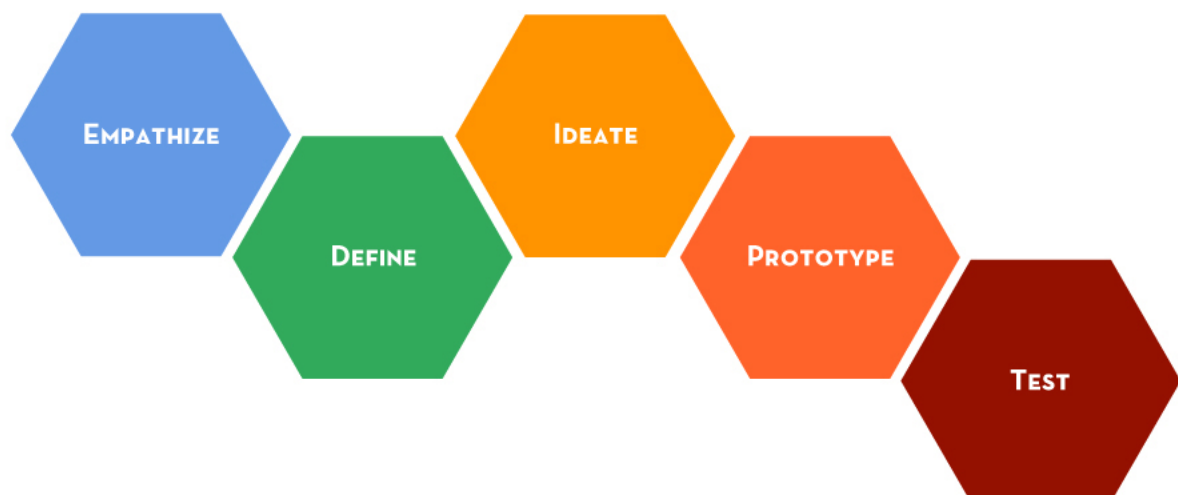


Figure 2: Stanford d.school Design Thinking Process. From: Op. Cit., Mitroff Silvers et al., 2013.

Kembel, the director of the Stanford d.school, developed the Design Thinking Process presented in figure 2. The inclusion of traditional humanities approaches such as empathy and definition, alongside the more innovative and activist stages of ideation, prototyping and testing, make it a useful model for 'risky' research within the traditional parameters of museum studies. Mitroff Silvers, Rogers and Wilson used what is commonly known as Stanford d.school Design Thinking Process to develop visitor engagement within museums.^{xlv} Whilst Kembel developed the model, it is more widely attributed to Stanford d.school (than its author). Mitroff Silvers et al. (a team of researchers at Stanford d.school and members of staff at San Francisco Museum of Modern Art) developed a collaborative project to provide graduate students with opportunities to develop human centred design skills in a real world context. Through a three week intensive format, students from across Stanford were invited take part in a programme of workshops that concluded with students presenting visitor engagement solutions to SFMoMA. The Design Thinking Process provides the intensive with a loose and supportive format to facilitate interdisciplinary practice, and as such participants ranged from law students to medical students. The process supports risk, through, for example, the ideation stage, which invites participants to develop the broadest range of ideas, regardless of how viable they may seem on paper. This challenges participants to think beyond what is right and wrong, and challenge established social practices that exist in everyday spaces (in this instance museums). For Mitroff Silvers et al. the strength in this process is its ability to tackle 'messy real-world challenges that are hard to define and even harder to solve'^{xlvi} in both a quick and low budget fashion. By embracing perpetual beta, this process permits participants to prototype, test and refine, rather than being paralysed through pursuit of perfection.

The human centred focus within both these projects (Getswicki and McNely; and Mitroff Silvers et al.) is that of the visitor; however in my research the human centred focus is on museum professionals. 'Design thinking is a philosophy, a mind set, and a methodology'^{xlvii} and thus the flexibility of this process means that it can be used in different contexts, sectors, and with different actors and protagonists.

Adopting and adapting the Design Thinking process to supportive critical praxis within the museum studies discipline

The Stanford d. School Design Thinking Process provides a linear narrative from which to stretch the boundaries of established museum studies research practices. Using this framework this research project straddles the boundaries of humanities and design modes of research (as defined by Roome).^{xlviii}

The workshop began with a series of presentations exploring digital practices in museums, and more specifically the digital strategy of Wellcome Collection. Danny Birchall then introduced the concept of project constraints and design thinking methodologies through a paper prototype. The linking of problems to prototype and

proof of concept solutions demonstrated how ideas could be translated into action research in a low budget, time constrained manner it also demonstrated that critical praxis is a way of working, that requires confidence more than it does resources. Students were then presented with four design challenges—real problems that the digital team at Wellcome were currently working on—and tasked with prototyping solutions to those problems. The challenges focused on: deepening relationships with visitors, collecting experiences, making galleries playful and reaching international audiences. Each statement provided an empathy or contextual background, followed by a defined challenge statement or question, for example:

Deepening our relationship

We would like visitors to see visiting Wellcome Collection as the start of a bigger and deeper experience, involving a relationship between us and the visitor. We don't just want to tell people to visit a website or follow a hashtag, we want to offer something meaningful to the visitor, based on our digital capabilities.

What could we do to make a visit to Wellcome Collection the beginning of a relationship that is supported by digital media?

Students self-selected, which challenge they want to respond to and formed groups based on these challenges. Each group was given 30 minutes to develop a solutions concept, which they received feedback on, and were provided with 15 prototype development prompts. A checklist that encouraged students to think about the practical development and application of their concept prompts included:

1. Where does the experience begin? (i.e. in a specific gallery, the lift, the toilets, at the ticket desk, on the museums website, via twitter, Facebook)
2. How does the experience begin? (you climb through a tunnel, you open a secret door, you click an online link, you open a text message)
3. Describe the experience in detail (the key information a museum would need to develop or implement your concept. Consider music, lighting, use of technology, costumes, number of participants, how the experience is facilitated i.e. is it self-directed or lead by a guide, is a static experience, or is it mobile?)
4. How does the experience end? (Are there one, or multiple possible conclusions?)
5. How long does the experience last? (Are there multiple experience entry and exit points? Is there an online, or mobile follow up to the in-gallery experience?)

This check-list encouraged students to question existing museum practice, and begin to think about new ways for museums to work, produce and curate. Students then spent 60 minutes in the gallery spaces of the museum, taking photos and working on prototypes. The outputs from this workshop were much more paper based than the 12 hour Hack Day, however this shorter format provided students with the

opportunity to critically reflect on theory, respond to challenges, and prototype solutions.

Conclusion

The Design Thinking Process, developed by the Institute of Design at Stanford (University of Stanford California, also referred to as d.School), provides a useful model for linking the traditional approach to museum studies research, with the more activist model proposed in this paper.^{xlix} The process takes as its starting point two modes of traditional academic enquiry: empathy and definition. The Design Thinking Process neatly patches the humanities and design modes of research together; on the one hand it is concerned with identifying and defining social practices through empathy, and on the other it is interested in designing new situations and social practices. The partnering of a traditional humanities approach with a more innovative design approach, creates a rigorous model of museum studies as critical praxis within the accepted parameters of academia. Such an approach uses established practices as an established and solid foundation, from which a more innovative and ground breaking departure can be taken.

Central to the critical praxis theoretical framework and design thinking methodology proposed in this article is the use of challenges rather than a set brief, a problem statement rather than a defined task. If we want museums to be innovative, responsive and progressive institutions then we need to develop pedagogic practices that support risk. This paper seeks to present evidence to support one model for engendering critical praxis within existing museum studies courses, however more research is needed into how museums studies as a discipline can produce emerging professionals who are robust, agile and innovative when it comes to their work as a museum professional today, tomorrow and in 50 years time. We need to look towards a pedagogy that blends operational and critical skills, and encourages reflective practice. A shift towards critical praxis may be the practice-based methodology that museum studies as a discipline needs to strengthen and sustain itself in the 21st Century.

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^{iv} Vikki McCall and Clive Gray, 'Museums and the "New Museology": Theory, Practice and Organisational Change', *Museum Management and Curatorship*, vol.29, no.1, p. 437.

^v *Ibid.*, p. 442.

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