Exhibition Studies:

Learning and Sharing Expertise with Social Media

by Dana Allen-Greil

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When this regular feature of *Exhibitionist* was launched five years ago (Long & Fohrman, 2008) as a forum for student and faculty issues and ideas, Polly McKenna-Cress raised important questions about museum studies: How do we find and tap into deep thinking about what is next? How can educators create mutually beneficial discussions between museum studies departments and the field? A few years later, professors Nora Pat Small and Rick Riccio (Altshuler, et al., 2011) noted the enormous challenge of keeping up with technology, particularly in encouraging students to think both creatively and critically about the use of technology in museums.

In this article, I suggest that social media be used as a tool for tackling these challenges. Despite a decade of experience managing new media projects in museums, I firmly believe that when it comes to technology we are all perpetual students. Faculty, students, and museum professionals alike can use social media to open up access to expertise, participate in dialogue, and enhance learning throughout the field.

Three C's of Learning with Social Media

Blogs, wikis, and online social networks have ushered in an era of participation. You can see the transformative impacts of social media in how we talk to one another, who we talk to, how often we interact, what is deemed appropriate to say in public, and even our ideas about ownership and who can be an expert (Allen-Greil, May 21, 2013).

Learning theories such as social constructivism and connected learning emphasize interaction, knowledge networks, and collaboration as key components of learning. An emerging field of research focuses on the potential benefits of social media to the learner (Ala-Mutka, 2010; Brown & Adler, 2008; Cheal, Coughlin, & Moore, 2012; Greenhow & Gleason, 2012; Davis et al., 2012). Because social media comprises a wide array of information technology tools, communication activities, and digital modes of being, I find it helpful to organize the educational uses of social media into three key buckets:

- **Consume:** Learners can access a vast array of freely available content. Social media is particularly good at helping us obtain highly specific and

Screenshot of http://musete.ch, *a website featuring student-conducted interviews with experts in the museum technology field. Courtesy Dana Allen-Greil.*

Project Step	Description	Technologies	Mode
Speaker Outreach	Professor reaches out to potential speakers, outlines what is expected, sets date range.	Email, Twitter	Communicate
Pre-Interview Prep	Students sign up for topic/speaker. Interviewer creates new wiki page, includes speaker bio, specific date/time, relevant links.	Wiki	Consume
Interview Questions	Questions are crowdsourced by whole class. Interview collates and organizes final interview outline, emails speaker questions.	Wiki, Email	Collaborate
Live Interview	Interviewer, guest speaker, and other students (if available) connect to conference line. 45-60 minutes.	Freeconferencing.com Allows for hosting and recording conference calls via Skype and phone, eliminating long-distance fees and making calls more accessible	Communicate
Publishing	Within a few days of interview, interviewer posts brief recap (500 words) and link to audio recording to blog.	WordPress, divShare divShare hosts audio for streaming or mp3 download	Consume
Dissemination	Subscribers receive notice via RSS; professor and others promote via Twitter and Facebook.	Twitter, Facebook, RSS	Consume
Feedback	Students comment and ask follow-up questions within a week of interview	WordPress	Collaborate

Components of the musete.ch *interview process, followed by students in the graduate* "*Internet Strategies*" *course. Courtesy Dana Allen-Greil.*

up-to-the-minute knowledge, and for tracking topic trends.

- **Communicate:** Learners ask and answer questions, share research and reflections online, and participate in conversations about digital content. Social media also reduces barriers to connecting with experts around the world. The result is a huge resource of user-generated content from which all learners can mutually benefit.

- **Collaborate:** Social media makes it easier to tap the potential of a group of dispersed people committed to a common objective. Learners work together with others, pooling resources and expertise in real-time.

musete.ch: The Three C's in Practice
I know from experience in a physical classroom (as both learner and educator) that students consistently rate guest speakers as a highly valued element of their coursework. Guest speakers provide an important reality check, offer alternative perspectives, and bring timely case studies to light. When I transitioned to teaching courses online, I wanted to continue facilitating meaningful and

personal access to experts despite the lack of face-to-face interaction. Without the constraints of a physical classroom and the logistics of travel, I found new opportunities. I was free to invite guest speakers from all over the globe. Over the course of two semesters, the benefits of a networked world became evident in the recordings of 20 interviews with world-class guest speakers (published openly at http://musete.ch).

The musete.ch project showcases the best of learning 2.0. Students practice something I have found critical in my own career—courageously asking tough questions of the best sources of expertise available on a given subject. Students join the conversation in real time or asynchronously, depending on availability. Through interviewing, reflective writing practice, and collaborative work, students contribute to our collective knowledge about museum technology. Guest speakers enjoy talking with the next generation of museum professionals and are excited to share their insights in an open format. Perhaps best of all, the entire field benefits from free access to the expertise of museum technologists around the world. All three C's—consuming, communicating, and collaborating—are

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Hashtag	Topics Discussed
#musetech	museums and technology
#musesocial	museum-related uses of social media
#mtogo	mobile technologies in museums
#museumed	museum education

Museum-related hashtags and their meanings. Courtesy Dana Allen-Greil.

End Notes:

1. A hashtag, a word prefixed by the pound symbol (#), provides a way to group messages on social networking sites such as Twitter and Facebook. Carrie Kotcho and I introduced the #musetech hashtag as part of our "Museums & Technology" graduate course at the George Washington University (GWU) in 2010. Its use quickly spread among museum technology professionals and now is included in an average of 25 tweets from the field per day. See my hashtag glossary for a more comprehensive guide (Allen-Greil, Glossary of Museum-Related Hashtags, 2013).

2. To view an example, see a Storify recap of a Twitter chat on transforming teaching and learning with technology (Allen-Greil, #EdTechChat, 2013).

incorporated to engage participants in active learning.

If you'd like to develop a project that incorporates the three C's of learning with social media, here are some questions to get you started:

- What kind of content will be consumed, created, or shared?

- What connections could social media enable?

- What benefit is there to making these activities digital and/or publicly accessible?

- What collaborations might be fruitful to develop with the wider field?

Networking and Collective Intelligence: 21st Century Media Literacy Skills
The emergence of a participatory culture prompted media scholar Henry Jenkins to identify 11 competencies and social skills—including networking and collective intelligence—which learners need to succeed in the 21st century (2009). These competencies are crucial for museum professionals in today's connected workplace.

Networking
When we practice using social media, we are not simply learning how to push buttons; we also develop a better understanding of how networks function and how they can be used to search for, synthesize, and disseminate information (Jenkins, 2009).

To learn about the latest developments in exhibition technology, one might start by searching Twitter for the #musetech hashtag.[1] While Twitter is a great source for what's happening now, all of that NOW-ness can be overwhelming. Tip: If you're feeling besieged during a Twitter chat, check out a Storify archive after the fact.[2] (Better yet, create your own Storify to help you synthesize.) Or follow links to longer-form platforms, which tend to feature more reflective content and offer more space for substantive discussions. (See Kate Haley Goldman's article in this issue for blog recommendations and other sources of inspiration.)

Twitter can also be an excellent resource for insights and discussion during a conference or other event. Networking-savvy conference presenters often disseminate their slide decks on Slideshare, post video recordings on YouTube, or recap their talks as blog posts. Google+ is becoming a hot spot for museum technology conversations, as free Google Hangouts make it easy to participate in live small-group video chats and broadcast that feed to larger audiences.

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All of this tweeting and blogging and sharing is challenging traditional notions of expertise. As learning specialists Bingham and Conner explain: "The 21st century mind is a collective mind . . . What we store in our heads may not be as important as all that we can tap in our networks" (2010).

Collective Intelligence

While networking skills focus on searching and disseminating, collective intelligence is about comparing notes and pooling knowledge with others towards a common goal (Jenkins, 2009). Pierre Lévy, the leading expert on collective intelligence, describes the process as one in which "everyone knows something, nobody knows everything, and what any one person knows can be tapped by the group as a whole" (1999).

My work as a museum technologist has benefited tremendously from this social production of knowledge. For example, when I was recently tasked with procuring equipment for managing a fleet of iPads, I had many questions about handling the various tasks associated with tablets— everything from where you store them securely to how you charge and synch them to the best straps available for one-handed operation. I quickly posted a few specific questions in an openly editable Google Doc and sent out requests via Twitter and email asking for help. Within two days, I had a collaboratively-created document with a wealth of information representing the collective knowledge of the museum field's most experienced mobile technology practitioners. To return the favor of providing information to those seeking to learn, I transformed the raw Google Doc notes into an easier-to-

digest blog post and shared it with my networks (Allen-Greil, June 14, 2013).

This is just one example of the incredible generosity and openness I have experienced in the museum technology community, which is made up of people who value sharing expertise and supporting learners of all kinds. Wikis and other collaborative editing platforms help us work together across institutions and across oceans on the problems we all need solved. While these simple tools often require some instruction for new users, I have found that what learners need even more is guidance about the culture of open collaboration: not only is it okay but preferred that we work publicly, that we do not wait until knowledge is comprehensive or perfect to share it, and that collective intelligence requires both effort and respect from all parties involved.

Learning to Be

Innovation and learning expert John Seely Brown quite rightly points out that in every profession some kind of public practice is required. To be a full participant involves "acquiring the practices and norms of established practitioners in the field or acculturating into a community of practice" (2008). Incorporating social media into our teaching practices can help us to focus on what is most important in educating the next generation of museum professionals: not just learning *about* but learning to *be* (Brown & Adler, 2008). We know that learning is more easily transferred to the workplace if the educational context closely resembles the learner's future work context. As educators and practitioners, we must model the collaborative practices

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we wish to cultivate. We must strive to integrate learning into a wider community (Ala-Mutka, 2010) by linking together experts, researchers, and practitioners and opening up alternative channels for gaining knowledge and enhancing skills.

In preparing my students for careers in museums, I emphasize that it is critical to begin building relationships and tapping into available networks as early as possible. Those who have mastered networking and contributed to collective intelligence will be better equipped to lead museums of the future. A lack of participation both hurts learners' chances of future success as well as "strips the collective intelligence of diversity, and that has ramifications for us all" (Jenkins, 2009).

Social media has the potential to change many aspects of museum exhibitions: how we develop and test them, how people experience and share them, and how we expand their reach and scope beyond the constraints of a physical experience at a fixed moment in time. Rather than have students write exhibition reviews for the eyes of professors only, why not ask them to share them openly on ExhibitFiles.org? Instead of keeping case studies locked away in lecture presentations, why not share them on a collaborative Pinterest board?

I would love to hear from you about how you are using social media in your professional practice. What online networks do you tap into to find out what's next in museum exhibition technology? Which topics seem ripe for collaboration—among practitioners, between students, or with the public? What one step can you take towards modeling the social media behaviors we'd like to see in the next generation of museum professionals? ✳