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Engaged Gazes: Principles that Online and Flipped Teaching Can Learn From Themed Museum Exhibits

ONLINE INSTRUCTORS have known for some time that the primary work of creating an online course consists of "curation," which is usually understood to be a matter of selecting and creating appropriate texts and videos (Davis, 2017). But if we were to look critically at museums, an ideal representative for modern curation, we would recognize that the work of curation is much more than finding the right materials; it's also about crafting a visually arresting exhibit, a fact especially true at museums that adopt the kinds of trappings that theme parks do.

Indeed, some modern museums are akin to tourist attractions (Marstine, 2006). The specific choices made to render these exhibits interesting deploy several principles about attention, cognitive load, and preferences driven by the brain's physiology. As these museum exhibits demonstrate, we are hard-wired to be interested in visually-rich stimuli, novelty, and initially only surface-level information—but if we are properly challenged by a mystery, we invest the effort to discover the solution (Brown, Roediger, & McDaniel, 2014).

As a result, there are several lessons that online educators could learn from themed museum exhibits to make our online experiences as interesting as the newest museums. These lessons are presented here with the acronym GLIDE: Gaze, Layout, Immersion, Diversions, and Explore.

Gaze: Give priority to the visitor's first glance.

Good exhibits offer a striking first impression and attract visitors from afar to come closer (not unlike an academic poster session). These first impressions in physical museums often appeal to emotion first and only use logical appeals second, if at all. Because the brain is interested by mystery, the primary effort should be paid to generating visual interest, even when there is little immediate payoff in learning. In an online environment built to harvest the lessons from museums, photos would play by far the largest role. In fact, they should dominate each online page, dwarfing what text remains on the page.

Layout: Craft layout intentionally to reward desired behaviors, such as playing, analyzing, or lingering.

Museum curators carefully plan the path through the space so that even as visitors go new places, they see familiar things at a new angle or with a new content twist. The layout can encourage playing or deeper ruminations. The same can be done for students in an online course. This is perhaps accomplished most easily by situating and orienting visually rather than with text, thereby creating a visual language unique to your content. That might be the form of online images that are used repeatedly, but in different ways across each new page in the course. Or in the use of images that are visually dense with a challenge issued to unpack them. This creates the attention-grabbing scenario of a posed problem to solve, rather than focusing on "delivering" content.

Immersion: Borrow ideas of "you-are-there" immersion from theme parks.

Museum exhibit areas are heavily "themed" individually, with an emphasis on place-making even when one area normally would not exist logically next to the adjacent one. Like theme parks, museums provide attention to minor details that many will miss, and use storytelling where possible to drive interest (Sklar, 2015). Examples of this principle employed online could be mini-themes visible through images chosen on each page, even allowing the theme to change from page to page. Digital tricks can be used to auto-play music on each page, further creating a sense of place or setting.

Diversions: Include games, optional diversions, and variety.

We know from cognitive science that the brain has a persistent drive for novelty (Sousa, 2011), which museums leverage by making each exhibit look and function completely unlike any of the others before it. Online, this might look like including Easter eggs, changing the layout and logic of each page, including games, or also providing optional links for those interested in learning more about the topic beyond the required information.

Explore: Students should encounter content in layered stages.

Rather than overwhelm the senses with text, students should be exposed to content one bit at a time. In a museum this happens by coupling the primarily-visual exhibit with callout boxes, drawers to open to learn more, and positioning each exhibit as presenting a problem that requires exploration to find the solution. In an online academic course, students could be prompted to click certain links for additional information, or callout boxes could be used online as well, with a variation of words overlaid atop images. In some ways, this is merely a call to

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UDL: A Powerful Framework

Gwen Bass, PhD, and Michael Lawrence-Riddell

INCREASINGLY, INSTRUCTORS at the college level are called upon to create classroom learning experiences that can be characterized using terms like academically rigorous, accessible, differentiated, trauma-sensitive, inclusive, culturally relevant, and student-centered. While teaching faculty are generally regarded as content experts, supporting the diverse array of learning needs represented in our courses can prove challenging. Moreover, there is a growing expectation that we also teach 21st Century skills and prepare students for values-driven professional work, all the while maintaining accountability, encouraging effort over outcome, and implementing equitable and transparent grading practices. Institutions are finding creative ways to equip faculty with resources to meet these demands, and yet, this remains an incredibly tall order in the context of higher education as we know it.

Enter Universal Design for Learning (UDL). This powerful framework for educators centers around three principles that are aligned with neuroscience research on the networks that affect learning. Through UDL, educators reach all students by using:

1. Multiple means of representation: Give learners various ways of acquiring information and knowledge
2. Multiple means of expression: Provide learners alternatives for demonstrating what they know
3. Multiple means of engagement: Tap into learners' interests, offer appropriate challenges, and increase motivation ("Three Principles of UDL", 2019)

Implementing UDL requires anticipating a range of learning needs and embedding scaffolding into the curriculum and course materials that support students through challenges to content mastery and the acquisition of skills you want them to gain or refine—be them content-specific or the 21st Century type that are foundational to innovation, creativity, and professional achievement in today's workforce.

UDL is grounded in research demonstrating that students who are engaged perform at higher levels (McClenney, Marti, & Adkins, 2012), that people learn in different ways, and that everyone's path to the classroom is different. Students within a given classroom will have varying levels of comfort and readiness for assigned tasks. For example, a student who lacks prior content knowledge in one subject may be an expert in another. Similarly, when it comes to the learning process, some students in a classroom may have extensive experience and exposure to the research process, while others may need explicit teaching on how to do an assignment before they can complete it successfully. When students are provided multiple points of entry to course material and assignments, academic engagement and outcomes improve and educators uphold their responsibility to create a classroom culture that mimics that of the professional workplace, wherein leaders are seeking to fuel innovation by hiring employees who know how to collaborate, examine issues from multiple perspectives, and communicate creatively.

UDL is commonly adopted at the PreK-12 level, especially given shifts in special education funding, but it has been slower to gain traction in the college classroom. Many

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educators consider UDL an "alternative model" that requires us to redesign our classes to benefit students who "learn differently," rather than considering how this approach could serve all students in their pursuit of knowledge and preparation for the world of work. Research on innovation in the corporate context demonstrates that all markers of success in the business world hinge upon inherent diversity (that is, employing individuals with a range of fixed identity traits), but, more importantly, cultural practices centering around explicitly valuing and promoting inclusion of multiple perspectives. If one of our goals in higher education is to offer training that facilitates a smooth transition into the workforce, we actually owe it to all of our students to create learning environments that are inclusive of inherent diversity, and explicitly teach them how to engage authentically, how to innovate, and how to communicate across lines of difference.

Practically applied, suppose that you typically have students read a book chapter and then quiz them on specific information. Are there podcasts, films, or interactive websites that have similar content? Can you find ways to show your students how this information connects to their lives, their interests, and their prior knowledge? Are there unique applications of this content that students could identify independently, or ways that you could ask students to reflect on case studies, practical examples, or personal experiences to integrate the acquired knowledge in context? How can students collaborate in an effort to consider multiple perspectives, communicate their differing ideas about the content through a range of platforms and in various formats, and explore new directions for the application of emerging knowledge? Most importantly, how can our teaching practices explicitly demonstrate to our students that by honoring individualized learning paths, we are more positively contributing to the collective than when we apply a one-size-fits-all approach?

Most educators maintain the goal of communicating information to students in order to cultivate passion about the subject matter and inspire them to positively impact the field on a broader scale. When considering the integration of UDL principles in course design, there are two essential questions one must address: "What content is critical for students to take away?" and "What skills am I hoping my students gain or refine through this work?" If instructors use these key questions as a lens, or a litmus test, they can plan experiences for their students that allow for multiple means of gaining the information or producing work that conveys their understanding. Herein lies the opportunity for us to think about the application of learning beyond the walls of our classrooms and what we really want students to do with the knowledge and skills they acquire through our courses. When we cultivate a classroom climate that values multiple perspectives by integrating a range of learning exercises and applications, we are not only engaging our students more actively, but we are providing vital preparation for future professional pursuits.

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Michael Lawrence-Riddell has been an educator in one way, shape, or form for the better part of the last three decades. He has taught high school in Brooklyn, elementary school in Boston, and middle school in Amherst. While at Wesleyan University, Michael majored in African American Studies and was actively involved in anti-racist activism on campus. It is when Michael is able to marry his passions for learning, history, social justice, and a better future that he is his most fulfilled. Michael brings these passions to his current work creating a multimedia, digital curriculum that looks at the histories and legacies of institutional racism.

Other resources:

https://www.greatplacetowork.com/resources/reports/innovation-by-all

https://hbr.org/2013/12/how-diversity-can-drive-innovation

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McClenney, K., Marti, C. N., & Adkins, C. (2012). Student engagement and student outcomes: Key findings from" CCSSE" validation research. ERIC Clearinghouse. https://www.ccsse.org/aboutsurvey/docs/CCSSE%20Validation%20Summary.pdf

Gwen Bass, PhD and Michael Lawrence-Riddel; UDL: A Powerful Framework; Facutly Focus; January 6, 2020; [https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/course-design-ideas/universal-design-for-learning/] January 6, 2020.

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chunking (Smith, 2008) into a more visual format. The presentation of a problem and the need to click around to find solutions could work equally well in a learning management system.

A useful way to summarize the ideas of GLIDE is to imagine the online/museum comparison in reverse. If we took a poorly-conceived online course and translated it to a physical space, such a museum might be monochromatic, text-heavy, and visually quite boring. So it makes perfect sense to leverage the positive version of this comparison, and take the lessons of a bright, visually-rich, and interesting museum and attempt to import those concepts to the online academic environment.

An example of these principles put into action can be seen here, where German prepositions are taught as visually as possible (and still without using any English): http://bit.ly/engagedgazes

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Kevin Lee, PhD; Engaged Gazes: Principles that Online and Flipped Teaching Can Learn From Themed Museum Exhibits; Faculty Focus; December 11, 2019 [https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/blended-flipped-learning/principles-that-online-and-flipped-teaching-can-learn-from-themed-museum-exhibits/] January 2, 2020.