Integrating the Visual: understanding faculty-designed assignments in an academic museum

This handout is based on “Integrating the Visual: understanding faculty-designed assignments in an academic museum,” by Alison Barnes and D. Ryan Lynch. Published in the December 2012 issue of Museum Management and Curatorship, this article demonstrates how college-level assignments given at the Tang follow four distinctive patterns in terms of what kinds of cognitive exercises they ask students to perform.

Observation and Interpretation
The most basic assignment category is “Observation and Interpretation.” These assignments require students to produce a description and/or interpret a work or group of works at the museum. They are either oral or written and many are completed during one class period or are due a few days after the visit. Observation and Interpretation assignments ask that students depend on their own linguistic skills, experiences, ideas, and powers of visual analysis, generally requiring that students not do any outside research or comparison. In other words, they privilege the importance of visual-to-verbal expression. These exercises are sometimes part of a larger curriculum that teaches students how to write essays and engage in research.

Examples of Observation and Interpretation:

- An English Professor asked his Writing Arts Reviews students to compose an accurate description of an artwork without including interpretation. Students then examined one another’s descriptions and discussed why it is difficult to separate observation from interpretation.  

- In a Latin American history survey, students were asked to write essays based on their observations and interpretations of Pre-Columbian objects. The professor used this assignment as a writing diagnostic tool and also as an exercise that demonstrates the importance of drawing from evidence.

Analysis and Synthesis
Assignments in the second category, “Analysis and Synthesis,” focus on making connections between objects and other course materials. Professors using Analysis and Synthesis exercises direct their students to analyze objects and their connections to texts and/or to synthesize course concepts and skills while engaging with objects and exhibitions. While we see professors from a range of disciplines using this approach, it is particularly popular with English professors, perhaps because processes of analysis and synthesis often serve a supporting role in writing assignments and course projects.

Examples of Analysis and Synthesis:

- An English professor teaching Literature of the Second World War used a collection of prints by John Heartfield to discuss the distinctions between visual and verbal forms. As

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the discussion developed, students analyzed how Heartfield’s perspectives differ from others encountered in the course.3
• A professor of dance asked students to write a libretto or script that recreated part of an artwork. Students later developed their work into a performance. 4

Research
“Research” is one of the two more complex (and often time-consuming) types of museum-based assignments. Projects in this category require research that relates to objects and exhibitions. While they almost universally involve a certain amount of observation, interpretation, and analysis, the overall goal is for students to complete independent research on objects or related themes. We most commonly see research assigned by art history faculty, possibly because the research and study of art objects form the core of this discipline. That said, this is not a discipline-specific category; while most of our examples come from disciplines that privilege the object, we also see faculty creating museum-based assignments as building exercises for broader theme-driven research projects.

Examples of Research:

• An organic chemistry professor asked students to use the web resources for Molecules that Matter to conduct research on one aspect of a molecule in the exhibition. Working in small groups, students gave oral presentations on their findings. 5
• A photography professor introduced his students to a unit on portraiture by looking at photographs of people in the collection. In the creative arts, professors often expose students to work by particular artists as “research;” this is part of teaching students how to look at technique but also how to draw inspiration from the world around them. 6

Organization
The final category is “Organization.” These assignments require students to organize their own exhibitions or to suggest how an exhibition might be reorganized. Such projects almost always integrate aspects of other types of assignments, particularly Analysis and Synthesis and Research. Organization projects are distinct, however, in that they require students to use their research and study of objects as the basis for an organization or reorganization of objects and ideas. One key to these assignments is that they are based on students’ own conceptualizations of the relationships between objects.

Examples of Organization:

• Archeology students chose a group of artifacts from the Archeology lab and wrote an essay in which they situated those artifacts in Lives of the Hudson and critiqued the exhibition. 7
• An Asian art history professor asked her students to choose a theme and imagine an exhibition using five objects. Their final 5-7 page exhibition proposal and wall texts integrated observation and interpretation, analysis and synthesis and research. 8

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