

The Laboratory of Museum Studies: Museality in the Making

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As makerspaces and hackerspaces pop up in libraries and museums, one little lab sits in the middle of an Information School, but it is not a maker-space, a gallery, or a museum. The MuseLab, at the Kent State School of Information, is something else, something new—or perhaps something familiar, but situated in a different context, making it less easy to define. The MuseLab is a laboratory for museum studies, where museality—the characteristic of something that in one reality documents another reality—is at the heart of all our activities. Created around design thinking principles and propositions of emergence and openness, the MuseLab is truly a space for experimentation, practice, and breaking rules in the interest of learning, innovating, and discovery. As more and more higher education courses go online, face-to-face creative group activities are becoming scarce. The story of the lab's genesis and development may be of interest for other LIS schools, programs, teachers, and information practitioners.

Keywords: Experimentation, museum studies, museality, open work, museum system, makerspaces, prototyping, design thinking, LIS education

Introduction

As makerspaces and hackerspaces pop up in libraries and museums, one little lab sits in the middle of an Information School, but is not a maker-space, a gallery, or a museum. The MuseLab, at the Kent State School of Information is something else, something new—or perhaps something familiar, but positioned in a different context, making it less easy to define. The MuseLab is a laboratory for museum studies. But even this is not self-explanatory. Created around design thinking principles and propositions of emergence and openness, the MuseLab is truly a space for experimentation, practice, and breaking rules in the interest of learning, innovating, creating, and discovering.

As more and more higher education courses go online, face-to-face creative group activities are becoming scarce. In our LIS programs, we seem to be heavily concerned with teaching critical thinking skills but less concerned with developing

creative thinking skills (Seligman, 2012). Both are necessary in today's work (and everyday) world. How do we make sure we provide access to both? In the interest of bringing creative thinking back to the table, I am writing this article to share my experience in developing and implementing a space that allows both critical and creative thinking practice. Such places are important places of learning and meaning-making for students and faculty alike. The story of the lab's genesis and development may be of interest for other Schools, programs, teachers, and information practitioners.

What are you, MuseLab, if not a Makerspace?

The maker-movement is hot. In a very short time, makerspaces are cropping up everywhere, especially in libraries and museums. Peppler, Halverson, and Kafai (2016) describe the recent maker-movement as one of open exploration, intrinsic

interest, and creative ideas, characterized by fast prototyping and widespread sharing of ideas. In this sense, the MuseLab can be considered a makerspace. But makerspaces are also identified as being dedicated to hands-on making and technological innovation (which oddly seem to be two ends of the spectrum), DIY, propelled by new technology. The MuseLab is not, however, focused on new technology. Rather, we see new technology as something that can be garnered from the entire arsenal of options in the world—but only when it is needed—we are not using technology for the sake of using technology (in the spirit of Randi Korn's (2010) notion of "less is more").

The maker-movement is also described as pushing the limits of what is possible in traditional LIS domains. That too, fits the MuseLab. We most certainly push, or test, the current perceived limits of museum studies theory and praxis. But we do not push for pushing's sake. We allow pushing if it becomes pertinent and relevant to the project underway. Indeed, the MuseLab is a creative space in a LIS environment, and while it shares characteristics with makerspaces, there are differences.

Whereas makerspaces, hackerspaces, and fablabs are designed to be innovation spaces with the goal to "educate, innovate and invent using technology and digital fabrication to allow anyone to make (almost) anything, and thereby creating opportunities to improve lives and livelihoods around the world," (Fab Foundation, 2016) the MuseLab does not pivot on technology or innovation but rather around museality, possibility, and experimentation.

What exactly, then, is different about the MuseLab? Why do I consider that it is not a typical makerspace? The MuseLab is different from the typical makerspace for four reasons: (1) it is set up around the conceptual notion of museality, the characteristic of something that in one reality documents another, (2) it uses design thinking principles both functionally and

conceptually, (3) new technologies aren't necessarily involved, and (4) the "tinkering" (as Exploratorium calls it) is FOR the museum world itself.

Since the MuseLab shares many characteristics with the makerspace concept, but is not itself truly a makerspace, perhaps we can consider it a species of makerspace? This in itself is an interesting notion to ponder - that there is a spectrum of spaces where active manipulation of things by people occurs. If indeed we see the spectrum, we can begin to think about a whole ecology of space types, from the children's library to a chemistry lab. When considered like this, the makerspace movement may simply be a reaction to shifts in the way we do things in the world. If we look more closely, we can see that we have always had makerspaces in higher education (as well as in other information environments).

Below I explore the foundations of MuseLab and attempt to better define what this kind of space actually is. Following an introduction to the space and its uses, I will describe some of the influences that guided the creation and subsequent development of the MuseLab. Among these are Eco's (1989) concept of the Open Work (Eco, but especially as through David Carr's work) and Kathleen McLean's ideas around museum incubators.

Introduction to the MuseLab

In Fall 2013, the Kent State University's (then) School of Library and Information Science officially opened the MuseLab (a.k.a., "the lab"). This was an experimental space developed in conjunction within the new MLIS specialization in museum studies (see Latham, 2015 about the program that started in 2011).

The means and genesis to build the lab were provided by a grant from the Reinberger Foundation which is a local foundation that supports education, human service, and the arts (Reinberger Foundation, 2017). "The lab" is a relatively small

space situated on the 3rd floor of the main Kent State University library, within the School of Information. The MuseLab consists of two exhibit spaces: one along the entire front, outside of the MuseLab, 30' long and 24 inch deep, called the Wall Gallery (see Figure 1), and one inside, the Main Gallery, an approximately 20 foot × 20 foot “black box” with an open ceiling and built-in flexible options for use (see Figure 2). In the back, is a fully equipped work area (without major building machinery) and two small storage facilities.

This allows for a secure and safe protected area for borrowed artifacts and another for supplies and exhibit furniture. It is situated just off our lobby which is an active area for meetings, studying, and events for our School, our College, the Library and other departments on campus.

“The lab” is a place for collaboration and creativity around museal issues and inquiries. This space can be used by students, faculty, and practitioners to conduct research, try out exhibit ideas and programs, do course projects, teach work-

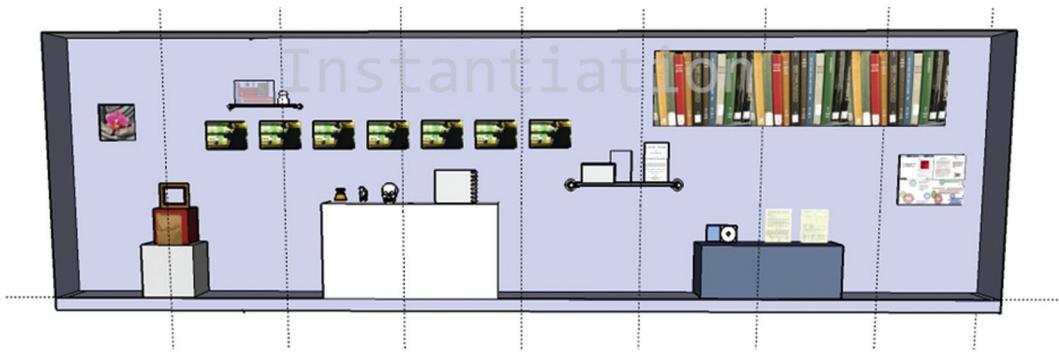


Figure 1. Sketch (DOCAM Instantiation exhibit) and photo (Museality exhibit) of the MuseLab’s “wall gallery” in the lobby of SLIS.



Figure 2. Sketch (“NonFiction” exhibit) and photo (What’s Real exhibit) of the MuseLab main gallery.

shops, and generally educate and entertain the local community (see Figure 3). Installations range from quick prototyping projects to more traditional gallery exhibitions to short workshops on specific is-

ssues such as preservation. The MuseLab was built around the design thinking principles of empathy, observation, collaboration, fast learning, visualization of ideas and prototyping. This is a methodology

The MuseLab Plan

Mission:

A creative and collaborative space for thinking, doing and learning about museal things.

January 2014 - July 2015
18 month

PROGRAMS



KEY PARTNERS



KEY AUDIENCES



SERVICES & ACTIVITIES



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Figure 3. The first planning infographic explaining the MuseLab, used to conduct small stakeholder interviews in 2013–14.

for innovation and enablement but also involves notions of openness, emergence, holism, iteration, and possibility. It is a non-collecting facility but we do use and borrow artifacts from local institutions and individuals when needed. The mission of the MuseLab is a creative and collaborative space for thinking, doing, and learning about museal things.

The MuseLab was created with several goals in mind (and these have evolved since its opening):

- To generate and inspire research on museality
- To provide an atmosphere of innovation, creation, and collaboration between faculty, students, and community
- To host or install one exhibit or program per semester
- To have a place for museum studies students to put into practice skills and concepts they have learned in courses (on their own, in workshops, or for Culminating Experience research projects)
- To provide a service to the local museum community through equipment/space use or prototyping exhibitions
- To serve as a testing-ground for field-wide experimentation.

How is MuseLab used? When we first opened, we did not fully define what we could do, leaving the possibilities open so that we could see what needs there may be in our various communities. In the beginning, we hoped for the following:

- To create exhibitions (in-SLIS, in-Library, in-University, and with-community organizations)
- To help community organizations with preservation efforts
- As an innovative testing ground for faculty projects on museological topics, especially collaborative work
- As a workspace for students studying broadly defined museological topics (individual & class projects)
- To meet for courses, workshops, clubs,

speakers related broadly to the MuseLab's mission

- As a place for everyone to come enjoy the efforts (when projects are being exhibited or conducted)
- As a place for conversation, inspiration (in the spirit of: this is what museums do)
- To break the rules and push the limits of current museum studies pedagogy (this one developed organically, and was added more recently)

In the true spirit of emergence and openness, since we opened we have come to learn how the space can be used with success. Some specific examples of what we have done are:

- *Fashion School Partnerships*: We worked with The Fashion School here at Kent State on several projects, including an exhibition of the work produced by student innovators at the Fashion Tech Hackathon. This is a "backwards exhibit" developed with University Innovation Fellows, and a guest-curated exhibit that explores the meaning of glass in museum exhibits.
- *Beauty of Data*: This was developed as an exhibit, which was crowd-sourced through the submissions of researchers across campus who submitted their Beautiful Data in a multitude of forms.
- *Mona Lisa X4*: In this project we conducted a research project with Smithsonian and Duquesne University researchers by building an exhibit to test a visitor experience theory. The exhibit was developed by master's students in the museum studies program who worked with the researchers. Culminating Experience graduate students built the exhibition. And finally, undergraduate students took surveys and experienced the exhibit, allowing us to collect data to test the theory.
- *What's Real? Investigating Multi-modality*: This was a co-creation of an exhibit between two Schools that

included students from three courses, and three professors from the Schools of Library and Information Science and Visual Communication Design.

- *Crash Exhibits*: We developed the concept of Crash Exhibits that will be used to “untrain” museum professionals, helping to re-energize creative thinking around museum work.
- *The Document Academy Instantiation*: Here we introduced a “pop-up” exhibit in an academic conference by having participants send or bring “documents” that represented their talks, then putting it together in a fast built, short-duration exhibit during the conference.
- *Skill Clinics*: This was a series of short, targeted how-to workshops that are offered inexpensively (to all, not restricted to students) but taught by experts. Examples are *Sketch-Up for Museums*, *Disaster Preparedness 101: Prepare a Plan Before a Disaster Hits Your Museum* and *What’s in the Mystery Box? Common Collection Conundrums*.
- *Course integration*: Here we integrated exhibition praxis into two courses that span two semesters and multiple graduate students, both online and in-person.
- *themuselab.org Blog*: In 2016, we began a blog site where we “collect” in one place all the things we’ve done, host a blog, and provide a centralized online space for our activities.
- *Relating Theory and Practice*: The lab shows how theory and practice can work in tandem. For example, we have applied the Object Knowledge Framework (Wood & Latham, 2014) in two courses that built full exhibits.

Many of the things we hoped to do when we first developed the lab, have not yet come to fruition, as the lab is still in its early stages of development and many partnerships are in their infancy. We are only now becoming visible on our own campus and reports (such as this one) are being disseminated into the fields of mu-

seum studies and LIS. In our near future, however, we will be hosting local museums as a testing ground for ideas they want to experiment with but otherwise could not do in their own museums. These projects are a result of openness and the willingness to define our work with flexible parameters and to work in tandem with the needs of our community.

Administration of the The MuseLab

When we opened we had no operating budget at all. Now, although our budget is small, our department has provided enough support to allow the most basic activities to function and flourish—and we have used it to the greatest effect. Graduate assistants, student workers, and volunteers are immensely important; the lab could not function without them. We struggle, however, to get more than a few live students in regularly because the MLIS is almost completely online. More than half of our museum studies students are too far from campus to volunteer. “The lab” is run by the faculty director (the author), a part time graduate assistant (20 hours/week), and an hourly student worker (10 hours/week). Once a year, our advisory council meets, giving the lab a chance to “check-in” with representatives of our stakeholders, get feedback about our activities, act as a sounding board for the director, and generate ideas for the future. We hold one or two exhibit openings a year and maintain our blog to generate and keep interest (The MuseLab, 2017). We also share our activities with those who cannot physically join us, and keep track of all the great things we are doing. We have held “skill clinics,” and hope in the future to hold Salons, and Jam sessions (see Figure 4 for definitions).

A Museum for Museums (sort of)

Since the second half of 2013, the lab has held 13 exhibitions. These have variously involved students, volunteers, Cul-

minating Experience students, staff, faculty, and outside research partners. In most university museum galleries this is not an unusual assortment of participants. Many university museums make it their central mission to especially involve students in their work. What is different about the MuseLab from most university galleries, is that the content is not specific to a discipline, such as art or history, but rather to the structure of the work itself. The MuseLab, at its heart, involves the exploration of museality. This means that the content of our exhibitions can be anything, any subject matter, so long as we are “playing around with” the ways in which we get that content across to visitors. This is what Bates is referring to when she positions museum studies (and information science) as a meta-discipline (Bates, 2015; Latham, 2015). Further, we hope to disseminate our findings and discoveries as the process evolves, whether that is in formal peer-reviewed journals, local magazines, or by blogging. Contributing to disciplinary spheres of knowledge is an important aspect of the lab’s work.

Thus far, exhibition-making is what we have done the most of. But the lab also supports the MuseCafe, a central programming entity that offers information about museum studies and museal things. The MuseCafe consists of four kinds of programs, some of which are still in planning phase: Club Muse, a live social-networking for SLIS museum studies students; Skill Clinics, Jam Sessions and Salons (see Figure 4). Topics can range broadly from current happenings to enduring issues around museums, objects, heritage, documents, memory, and more.

On January 1, 2016 we started a blog for the MuseLab. This is a place to showcase the things that we are doing or have done in the lab, and to provide a place for various voices involved in lab activities. We share a new post on the first of each month. This is written by students, faculty, or our partners. We see the blog as a place to continue the exploration of ideas that

we begin in the lab, and in the museum studies program (which itself is somewhat experimental as well). In late 2016, we began a series, for example, questioning the state of museum studies as a field in the US. This has allowed us to bridge the activities of the lab with the pedagogy and content of our program.

The Pivot Point: Museality

The meaning of museality seems to pervade all MuseLab activities. The concept museal, and its related terms—musealia, musealization, museality—have become important in international museum studies literature and practice (see for example, Desvallées, & Mairesse, 2010). Together, they refer to the characteristic of something that in one reality documents another reality; and musealization is the process and context in which an object becomes musealia (“objects” or “documents”) (Maroević, 1998). These concepts have been used as a theoretical field of reference which is meant to provoke thinking about objects of culture as well as their contexts. The concepts are useful for understanding many things, including the role of museum objects, the meaning of collecting, and human experience with things. The concept is very inclusive and goes beyond the physical museum building and thereby, opens up and invites a wide range of problems and issues that can be potentially explored across, and through, many disciplines and fields of study (Latham, 2016).

Putting museality at the center of our mission has allowed us to do very interesting projects in the lab, as nearly anything can be musealized. We have explored the concept itself—what does it mean when something is labeled, categorized, and exhibited? (e.g. the exhibit, *Museality*, 2014–15). We have questioned barriers and parameters, such as glass in one exhibit (*Looking Through Glass*, 2016–17). We have explored a theory of museum experience, IPOP (Pekarik, Schreiber, Hanemann, Richmond, & Mogel, 2014; Latham,

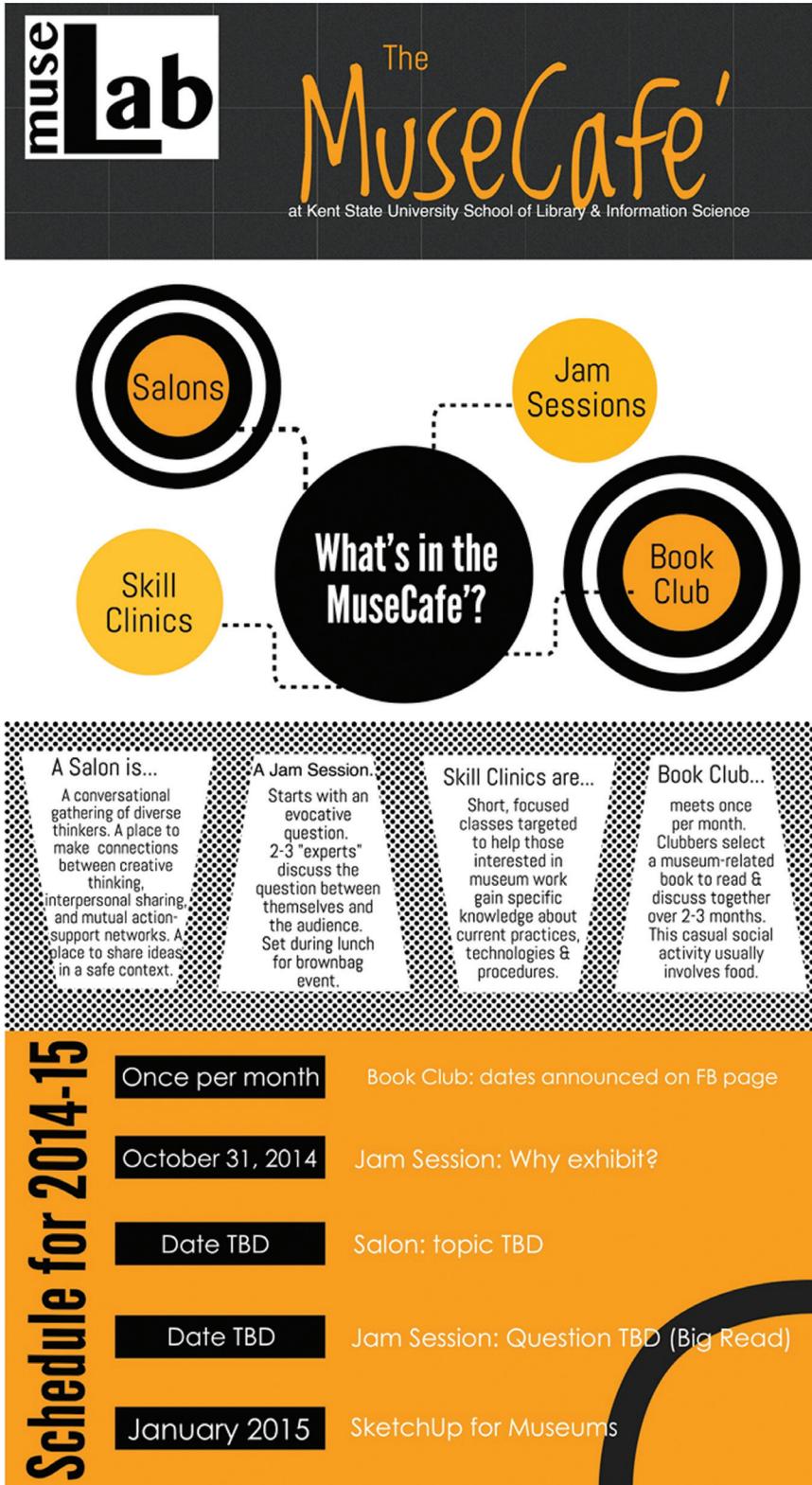


Figure 4. Infographic of the MuseCafe' planning for 2014–15.

2017b) (*Mona Lisa X4*, 2015–2017). We have turned it all upside-down and created “backwards exhibits” (built backwards, from finished exhibit to big idea to title) or what we call, “crash exhibits” (organically developed, very little planning, fast exhibits built with whatever is available on site), both processes that break many typical exhibit-making rules. And, of course, we have done more traditional, content-driven exhibitions (*Non-fiction*, 2015; *What’s Real?*, 2014) that have allowed students to go through the exhibition-making process from start to finish, giving them skills needed in professional praxis.

Why is the Lab an Open Work? (and other influences)

In the current era museums are businesses. They need to be structured, have plans, strategies, and rules. There is a need to plan out an exhibition schedule at least three years in advance. The traditional process from beginning to end is very linear and sequential, what McLean calls the “tyranny of process” (McLean, 2015, p. 13). Of course, not all museums can do this, but even those that are more reactive have schedules to adhere to, budgets to follow, and limited labor and other resources to allocate responsibly. There is little time for experimentation and even less time for dissemination of these underlying lessons and discoveries. Publishing what was learned in an exhibition (and other museum processes) is not something routinely built into daily museum work.

From its very inception, we were careful not to define too specifically what “the lab” was. This openness is the most important characteristic of the lab as it flows not only through its initial creation, but the way we conduct our daily work and how we perceive the experimentation process. This is not linear. Without intentionally starting so, what we did was develop the lab as an *open work*. Eco’s (1989) concept of the open work involves the powerful concept of “openness” This is known as

“unfinished work” or “work in movement” which he used in the context of art creation, that is, the artist’s decision to leave arrangements of some constituents of a work to the public or to chance (Weitz, 2013). Eco argued that, for instance, literary texts are *fields* of meaning, rather than linear strings of meaning (similar to Latour & Lowe’s (2010) notion of the “career” or “trajectory” of an artwork). These should be understood as open, internally dynamic, and psychologically engaged, a sort of psychological collaboration between author and reader (Weitz, 2013). He felt that contemporary art was especially amenable to these concepts and described a new category of contemporary works, called “works in movement” which consist of unplanned or physically incomplete structural units that need to be completed in an ongoing interaction between the author (with his or her intentions) and the interactant who makes choices from among those options given. The “work in movement” refers to the possibilities available for numerous personal inventions, but it is not an invitation to indiscriminately participate. In other words, there are still parameters within the structure. Meanings made are not intended to be limitless, but rather, plastic. This “invitation” offers the interactant opportunities to insert him or herself (as oriented by the author) into something that remains an invention by the author. In other words, there are still parameters, but there is a range of parameters rather than rigidly pre-established interpretation. Eco does not mean for there to be limitless interpretations, and still believes in the “authorial intentions” of the original maker(s) (Weitz, 2013).

By defining parameters but not specifics in the initial creation of the lab, we were creating an open work, to be filled in and iteratively defined by its different users over time. So, while we knew we were building a “museum studies lab” (in an Information School) we were not willing to define precisely what that meant so as to see what interpretations, processes, and

uses might come to us. Even so, we were doing this in the context of exhibit-making, preservation studies, document work, and museology, all existing structures and material taught in our program. Museums can be very traditional, and in that sense, unchanging. But modern museums are nothing if not dynamic and if this lab was left “open” to see how users (and facilitators) might shape it, we could potentially contribute to new thinking and new techniques for museum work and theory.

David Carr (2001), speaking mostly of completed exhibitions and programs, carried the open work concept best to museums:

The work of the museum is the revelation of artefacts and texts, but also it is the revelation and embodiment of tacit subtexts and more private, whispered, even unspoken, perhaps unspeakable, meanings or feelings. . . . Not only is the museum a place for the construction of meanings and their integration into one’s knowledge and experience; the museum is itself a construction of meanings. Nothing is there by accident, and neither are its users. At its best, a museum is a constructed situation, a place we seek out purposefully, in order to explore and revise the formative messages we gather about ourselves, engaged as we always are in the process of self-identification, our own process of construction (pp. 173–174).

In a museum, ‘what we try to do with what we think about’ is to engage in sequences of relationships with objects, texts, and other human beings, followed by pauses, reflections, evaluations and plans. We might consider the museum to be an open system in part because of what the user brings to these encounters: a history as a learner, a repertoire of private memory, a scheme of the world, a self-designed desire to become different.

While he spoke of the museum as an open work, Carr was mostly referring to finished exhibitions or installations, not necessarily the process of museal experi-

mentation. But his notion of the museum as a “constructed situation” and an open system resonates with us. What if we took that notion of construction and openness to the many processes involved in the existence of the museum itself?

In addition, this idea of the museum visit as a “situation” that occurs between a person and an environment (an exhibit, an object, an institution) fits well with the MuseLab director’s notion of person-document transaction (Wood & Latham, 2013), a concept used throughout the museum studies program at Kent’s iSchool and similarly described by Carr (2001) regarding the museum as an open work:

The museum and I are interdependent. It is a dynamic knowledge structure, and I am a dynamic cognitive structure. I bring my energies to every moment. I make cognitive moves among what I know and do not know. Knowing this, remembering that, expecting something, being astonished and fascinated, being bored, falling backward, forcing myself ahead. This is what I do here. As an actor and thinking receiver in the museum, my work is to test and direct the flow of my own ideas, and at times it is to move against the flow, to avoid the familiar, to overcome the constraints of the situation and my own inadequate responses to it. I move with my own best questions, my pauses and reflections, my tentative perceptions of meaning. My task is, in the midst of this situation, to reconstruct and reassemble the situation I have been given, controlling and recombining its elements as I need them most to be. With luck, I am surprised. With great luck, I am astonished. (p. 175)

This kind of experience, described by Carr, is always considered when we do our work in “the lab”. We approach the creation of an exhibit, for instance, knowing that a visitor (interactant/visitor/reader/transactant) will not necessarily experience it as the planners designed. There is a need for planners to understand and accept this and even “plan” for it. That is an

open work. It means that planners must be flexible, fluid, responsive, and willing to accept differing “outcomes” rather than striving for a small set of strict responses (Pekarik, 2010).

McLean (2015) calls this ability to be responsive and able to deal with change “being nimble.” She discusses the need for this nimbleness in the museum context and raises the notion of “museum incubators”:

Museum incubators provide a controlled environment in which exhibition professionals can experiment with nimble processes and responsive ideas and practice creating exhibitions and programs in new ways...environments designed to hatch new creative ideas and processes and protect them until they can fend for themselves (p. 8).

McLean suggests these incubators be situated in museums themselves. The traditional structures of museums may mean that this practice (and the kind of thinking needed to implement it) will take some time to integrate. University museums are perfect places for such experimentation and more can be done too allow museum programs and academic museums to integrate this experimental ethic into their curriculum.

Incubators, according to McLean, are characterized by prototyping activities, something that is not new to museums, and in fact, some have done this sort of work for many years (for example, Minnesota History Center, the Exploratorium). But dedication to the time, labor, and materials for such work has not yet been integrated into daily museum practice. Prototyping is a state of mind. It can be difficult for museum professionals, often planning-oriented individuals with little time for experimentation to adopt an ethic for “throwing” up exhibits using tape, binder clips, cardboard, and newsprint even though such activities have been shown to improve planning final exhibit quality. In addition, museums that are able to prototype seem to only do so for their own

specific purposes, not with the intention to push the boundaries of practice or theory in the field. Experimentation for experimentation’s sake is simply not something many museums can afford to do. And, as mentioned earlier, the problem of disseminating ideas remains a serious problem in the field. In an early rendition of the MuseLab’s mission, we colloquially used a tagline internally, calling ourselves a “museum for museums.” By this we meant that we were here to help the field move forward, change, experiment, try things out, push some boundaries. We were here FOR museums.

In “the lab”, we have come to adopt the Exploratorium’s motto that no exhibit is ever finished (McLean, 2015). We believe that this sentiment is more than just a statement, it is a foundational building block; it is the key to new thinking about museum exhibition. If museum professionals (and visitors) understand the exhibit as having an ellipsis and not a period, this could change so much in professional practice and visitor experience.

McLean (2015) rightly points out that performing experimentation in the outer museum affords a transparency that would not otherwise be available. In the lab we embrace our messiness and invite outsiders into our mess. This transparency is vital in many ways. First, it reveals just how extensive the processes that create an exhibition can be. As a museum studies educator, I cannot begin to count how many times non-museum professionals react when hearing what I do in my practice with “wow, I had no idea people needed to be trained to work in museums!” The daily buzz of activity in the lab reveals to those around us just what goes into museum work and this is an important statement to make.

The Evolution of the Lab

When the lab was born—in the submission of the grant application to the Reinberger Foundation in spring 2011—other

such museum studies labs were sparse, at least in the US. Later, we discovered the Museomix movement in Canada and Europe and in mid-2016, the American museum association, American Alliance of Museums (AAM) started a very similar version themselves. We have also learned of similar projects (although not full labs dedicated to experimentation) that have conducted similar kinds of activities, many in University museums and galleries.

By going into this project with the intention of being open and allowing for the discoveries made along the way to guide us, beautiful things happened that were not anticipated. I will mention two in detail.

Crash Exhibits

The first is the development of the “crash exhibit.” This way of conducting the exhibit process came to us from a couple of opportunities that converged

in winter/spring of 2015–16. We had already conducted a more controlled version of such an exhibit in the 2014 Document Academy’s Instantiation (see above) so we already had opened the door to pop-up like exhibits. But in the 2015–16 academic year, the first of these converging experiences was a visit from the University Innovation Fellows (UIF). This was a group of innovation students from around the country who were hosted for a long weekend to participate in a wearables make-a-thon by the KSU Fashion School (using the Fashion School’s TechStyle Lab). At the end of their weekend they were to bring together their creations and install an exhibit in the lab. The whole exhibit-making process was done “backwards” or the opposite way exhibits are usually made (we referred to it as an “organic exhibit,” see Figure 5). Students (none of whom were from museum studies) had 75 minutes on a Sunday morning to design and install an

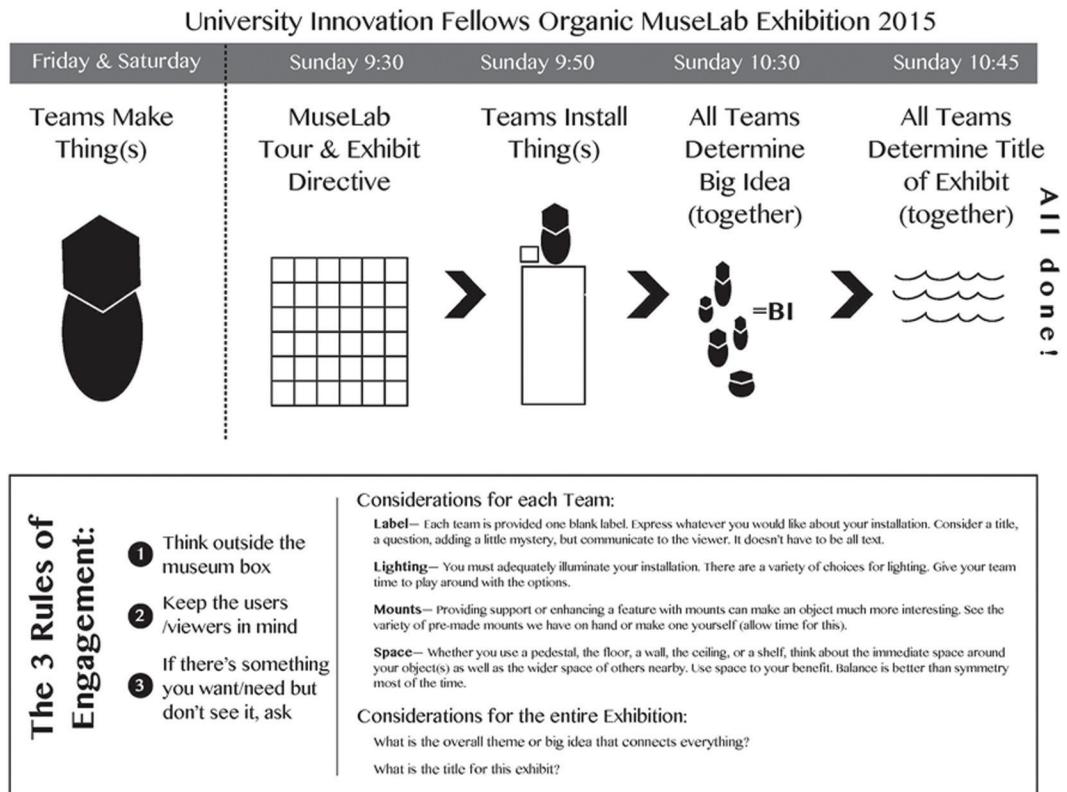


Figure 5. The one set of directions and process given to the UIF “crash exhibit” students.

exhibit based on their creations produced in the TechStyle Lab on Friday and Saturday. Together they first sketched up a plan based on all of their pieces, then they determined the big idea and finally decided on the title; *6 hours. 15 participants. Endless possibilities.* Students ended their weekend, leaving for home on Sunday afternoon, but their exhibit remained on display for the remainder of the week. MuseLab staff and the fellows all had a great time making, and the end result turned out well, but most of all it was the process that had the biggest effect on them. Many expressed how much they gained from the act of creating this exhibit, even though it was so short. Several said they will take this experience with them into their thinking about their various fields of practice and study.

A few weeks later, again working with The Fashion School's TechStyleLAB and Kent State's LaunchNET (formerly Blackstone LaunchPad), "the lab" took final creations from the third annual Fashion/Tech Hackathon, a cross-curricular event allowing teams of student participants to create and innovate within the realm of wearable technology. During the Hackathon, students spend 36 hours developing a project of their choice, usually in the form of a technology-enhanced garment or wearable-responsive app. All teams were given free access to the TechStyleLAB, the Fashion's digital textile fabrication space, along with a variety of electronic and textile materials. MuseLab staff took all pieces that were given (by the student creators) to put on exhibit in the main gallery. The next day, an exhibition was built around the pieces (22 creations) and a "backwards" approach was used once again. Organically, the pieces came together and a big idea emerged, all about the experience of being a maker in the hackathon. Sections of the exhibit were delineated into registration, tech check-out, making, living, and judging, and the show stayed up for about two weeks.

Following this installation, one more "crash exhibit" entered our world, this

one from a professor in the Architecture School, Brian Peters, who teaches architecture with 3D printers. He asked if we could install the results of his students' creation of lamps inspired by natural structures (see Figure 6). Within a couple of hours, we determined a design and a short time later, the exhibit was installed, coinciding with the University's annual Maker event held in the library (where MuseLab resides). Titled, *Inspired By Nature: 3D Printed Bio-Luminaires* (see Peters' blog, 2016) most of the development was done by Peters who also helped with installation. The exhibit was only in situ for a week but was very popular. This experience was not only an example of a "crash exhibit" but also an excellent showcase of the value of collaboration and creativity that is at the heart of our mission.

Integrated into Curriculum

The second development in our process has been the connected way we are now approaching annual student-involved exhibit-making projects in the lab. There are many parameters involved in offering a program in higher education, many parts that are behind the scenes. These include faculty load, university scheduling systems and rules, and the tenure-track process for faculty. When the lab was created, new staff were not allocated as part of the planning of the space. With a faculty director facilitating most of the work in the lab, we needed to determine an efficient way to get the most out of this innovative space but also balance it with these behind-the-scenes elements. In addition, we had to contend with the online vs. face-to-face student presence issue mentioned earlier. Over the years we have involved students in multiple ways, trying out new approaches progressively while trying to involve both online and face-to-face students. First, a student who had done all her coursework online conducted her final (Culminating Experience) project in the main gallery by creating, developing,



Figure 6. “Crash exhibit,” Inspired By Nature: 3D Printed Bio-Luminaires.

and installing, and opening a full exhibit in one semester. This student had background in interior design but the workload was intense. Giving this task to a single person (albeit facilitated by her advisor) to complete in a single semester was just not feasible or sustainable into the future. It was not only difficult for her (she lived two hours away and worked full time) but her advisor (the author) incurred many extra hours of work as an exhibit facilitator (and teacher of advanced exhibit design).

Learning from that experience, we then ran a face-to-face course (twice) with the goal of creating and installing an entire exhibit. The first course was held over seven weeks and was taught jointly with two other professors from our sister-School, Visual Communication Design. There was a total of 45 students across the three courses. At the outset, the exhibit results were meant to become a research project, but this did not happen even though we wrote the IRB, the research design, and submitted two grant proposals. The outcome was amazing (see Kent State TV, 2014), but the process was extremely stressful as we discovered many unanticipated differences in disciplinary language and concepts. The second time we offered such a course, it was 15 weeks long and restricted to only

iSchool students (mostly museum studies), with a total of nine participants and this time, developed using a conceptual framework called the Object Knowledge Framework (Wood & Latham, 2013). Again, even with the reduced number of students and more time to do the exhibit-making, the process was very stressful, but the end exhibit (*Non-fiction: Literary Legends Unbound*) was stellar and had the added benefit of being centralized around a partnership with local cultural institutions around the NEA’s Big Read program. Although the courses were counted as regular load for the instructor (me), this too was not sustainable as I could not be taken away from the other museum studies courses every year in order to teach the exhibit-making course. We have six other museum studies courses offered regularly as well as a core course that I was responsible for teaching and coordinating. And this exhibit-making course was entirely face-to-face, so only students on campus, those willing to drive to campus, could participate.

Finally, knowing that this scenario was not sustainable, and to involve more students, our then Interim Director suggested that I try to integrate exhibit production into the existing suite of online courses.

From that thought, in Fall 2015, I created a major course project in the 100% online course, *Museum Communication*. In this course groups worked together on a single exhibit idea (a real one that I create) to develop a proposal, budget, and drawings that will then be used to create a new exhibit in the following Spring. Our Interim Director's idea was to offer this second part—the actual development and installation—as a Culminating Experience project option which is a requirement for all students in our program. Of course, the physical nature of making required Culminating Experience students to be present on campus to do this work, but it did allow the work and voices of the fall online course students into the process and product (and many came in person to the opening celebration). While it essentially becomes another course, this has been the most successful approach, the most integrated, and the most rewarding. This will be our approach for the present because it satisfies multiple points of both mission of the lab and the department.

Who Cares? Or, the Implications to LIS Education

The response to the lab has been incredibly positive. I have been asked many times how we came to be, how we function, and what our underlying are after 'secrets' that I felt it would be useful to share the concept with others in related field(s). In our own School, our courses have become nearly 100% online. This means most of the hands-on work our students do is in places *outside* our School. This is challenging. Even when we were submitting the grant for the lab major shifts in higher education were underway. Having a physical space in a School that was going fully online was a major concern. The same philosophy of the lab itself, the openness to potentialities, started here. This was not a "build-it-and-they-will-come" situation but, rather, an intentional framework for emergence. We had to design a place and

space that had structure but allowed for the unknown, the not-yet, as Maxine Greene calls it (Carr, 2001). We needed an open work. In an academic institution this was complex. Occupied with outcomes, measures, and predictions, currently academia, ironically, does not provide a lot of space for the unknown. Explaining this aspect of the lab has been difficult and only with time, as people see what it does and what happens when you run a structure openly, have we come to be better understood.

What are you, MuseLab?

Call it what you will. A makerspace, a species of makerspace, a hackerspace, an open work, a museum studies laboratory, an incubator, a gallery, a museum—we are all these things. Add to this, a work-in-progress. Part of being an open work means that we are dynamic, fluid, and responsive. Things change. People change. The way the MuseLab was set up accounts for this movement. It takes into account that our space sits in a web, a large network of effects from the School, to the university, to the field, to the state of our nation and our global concerns. No matter these shifts, we are here to serve as a creative and collaborative space, around museal issues, for the purposes of furthering the knowledge of our students, our faculty, and our communities.

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