

# ASCILITE 2023

*People, Partnerships and Pedagogies*

## Business school and museum partnership to change student perceptions on leadership

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Universities and museums often operate on different educational paradigms and partnerships between museums and universities have been relatively unexplored in some disciplines, making it difficult to generate new and innovative patterns of learning, research and scholarship. The day-to-day complexities of such inter-disciplinary partnership often remain hidden with much of the collaborative work conducted by individuals without formal university support. In this paper, we advocate for a more systematic and sustained partnership between university museums and educators and present a case study of a partnership between an on-campus museum and a business school to teach students about responsible leadership. We outline the benefits and challenges of such interdisciplinary partnership and present a case study where we explore Object-Based Learning (OBL) as the central element of this collaboration.

Keywords: Object-Based Learning; business education; museum education; partnership

### Introduction

The role of museums as partners for supporting new and innovative forms of learning and teaching in higher education is becoming more visible. During the 1980-90s, university museums in Australia generally located in the more traditional disciplines such as arts, history, geology, archaeology and medicine, struggled with limited capacity for income generation under strained budgets. The establishment of the Council of Australian Museums and Collections in 1992, and a review by the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee in 1996 provided support and new directions for university museums to become more relevant, and in some cases indispensable to universities (Yerbury, 2001). Some of the strategies from these new directions encouraged establishing networks and partnerships with university staff and identifying faculty champions who would support the museums in contributing to the core business of teaching and learning.

In this paper, we share our experiences of establishing and maintaining a partnership between the University of Sydney Business School and the on-campus Chau Chak Wing Museum. We outline the benefits and challenges of such interdisciplinary partnership and present a case study where we explore Object-Based Learning (OBL) as the central element of this collaboration.

### Background

Traditionally, university museums have their genesis as discipline-specific teaching collections. For those faculties without collections, working with a museum is a new interdisciplinary pedagogical approach. The day-to-day complexities of such inter-disciplinary partnerships often remain hidden. Much of the collaborative work happens by individuals without formal support by faculties and schools. One resource which is indispensable to museum and university collaboration is the new generation of Academic Engagement Curators as interpreters of knowledge, acting as links between the museum and faculty. These academic curators are often employing OBL, which can help soften the boundaries between each sector, creating a new model for collaboration focused on student learning.

### What is Object-Based Learning (OBL)

OBL is the active integration of curated objects, in this case artefacts, specimens, and artworks, into the learning environment to facilitate the acquisition of cross-disciplinary knowledge and skills (Chatterjee & Hannan, 2015). Viewed historically, technology can be conceptualised broadly to include "a vast array of artefacts, from Aztec pottery to musical instruments of the ancient world to the printed pages of the Renaissance to modern rockets and satellites" (Custer, 1995, p. 221). More recently, OBL has moved to incorporate multi-modality, adopting technology as a way of reaching a broader audience of learners. The case study reported in this paper references the use of 3D digital models as surrogate objects as well as technology supported learning platforms including Padlet, live polling and quiz platforms, whilst also leveraging tools that are widely used

including Zoom. OBL aids in the development of transferable skills such as deep observation, critical analysis and reflection, interpersonal communication, and teamwork (Guerry & Thogersen, 2023; Marie, 2010). Objects can inspire a sense of wonder, empathy and deep connection whilst offering unique and sometimes multi-sensory engagement experiences, all contributing to an effective model for information retention and further inquiry. By their very nature museum objects can stimulate discussion and debate and as such are excellent focal points for the development of skills needed for effective teamwork. Despite OBL having a limited history of application in some disciplines, it is a pedagogy with broad relevance to all areas of study. A careful scaffolding of the OBL skills and tasks allows students to develop a new confidence in working in unfamiliar settings.

### **The context of partnership: people and pedagogy**

At the core of our partnership are people and pedagogy. Our partnership is based on deep and sustained engagement between the Museum's Academic Engagement Curators and the educators from the Business School. It is not common for business courses to incorporate OBL in lessons and tutorials. Therefore, the diversity of collections at the Chau Chak Wing Museum, along with the pedagogical knowledge of the Academic Engagement Curators serves to amplify the benefits of OBL.

The partnership between the Museum and the Business School began in 2020, at the height of the pandemic. It was initiated when the first author, an educational developer, was seeking new ideas for enhancing student learning in a business course on creativity and analytics. After attending a workshop at the Chau Chak Wing Museum, the educational developer initiated the collaboration between the course teaching team and the Museum Academic Engagement Curators to design a series of OBL workshops for students. This was a large course with over 2000 students supported by 25 tutors and two course coordinators. One of the challenges involved the need to provide training for the tutors on implementing the designed OBL activities in their tutorials. Another challenge was the need to run most of the tutorials fully online as the international students were not able to come to Australia due to the pandemic travel restrictions. We have shared the design and implementation of OBL in this course elsewhere (Wardak et al., 2021). In this paper, we are presenting an ongoing case study of partnering with the Museum to enhance student engagement with the concept of leadership and challenge them to think differently.

### **Case study: changing student perceptions on leadership**

In a world of increasing complexity and rapid change, being a responsible leader and managing through and past crisis has been identified as a critical skill for graduates at the University of Sydney Business School. Business Schools play a crucial role in the formation of future leaders; however, they are often criticized for not aligning their leader development programs with evidence-based methods and approaches (Leroy et al, 2022). In addition, conventional approaches to teaching leadership in business schools have often stressed the role of the charismatic individual, often a white man, as a transformational leader providing a compelling vision for the future that others follow (Collinson & Tourish, 2015). To help students foster the skills and capabilities of effective leadership and support diverse expressions of leadership development, we designed a new course at the Sydney Business School. In this course, students work on real world problems and develop solutions that are data informed and iteratively designed, deployed and evaluated. Students are encouraged to examine the complexity of leadership dynamics and to question the assumption that power should be vested in the hands of a few. In the final assignment students submit an individual leadership portfolio that outlines their leadership understanding, capacity, skills and approach. One of the challenges we faced was students struggled to identify and articulate their unique and individual understanding of leadership that considered their diverse cultural and personal experiences. To help students explore leadership beyond popular tropes and challenge the normative and gendered discourse on leadership (Niesche & Heffernan, 2020), we designed a series of OBL workshops.

### **Research design and methods**

In this case study we are employing Design-Based Research (DBR) to explore how OBL can be implemented in business education. DBR is an interdisciplinary mixed-method approach that studies learning activities in a naturalistic setting (Barab, 2006). It aims to provide insights into the process of research so that others can make connections to their own contexts of innovation. DBR is a flexible framework that facilitates data collection through a variety of methods. In our study, we are collecting data through observation of the OBL workshops, collecting student post-workshop reflections, and analysing student leadership portfolios. DBR facilitates the cyclical enhancement of the learning tasks, materials, tools, and patterns of communication (Reimann, 2011). This project is in its second iteration with 45 student participants in the first and 32 involved in the second cycle.

## Co-designing OBL

For effective and long-lasting partnerships, it is important to determine and negotiate what is learned and how, who creates the content, who selects the objects, who interprets it and how, and what is the role of the educator and that of the museum collaborators.

The first cycle of this study coincided with Semester Two 2022 in Australia and the second cycle in Semester One 2023. The design conversation between the Academic Engagement Curators and the educators from the Business School began at least four to five months before the start of the semester with scheduling the workshops and booking the learning spaces at the Museum. Some of the decisions at this stage could only be tentative. For example, student numbers and their mode of enrolment, in-person/online, could not be determined until the start of the semester. In the first cycle, two one-hour workshops were delivered each in two modes: in-person in the Museum's learning spaces and online through Zoom. In the second cycle, one two-hour workshop was delivered in-person only.

Once the learning outcomes for the workshops were negotiated, the team began to select the Museum objects for the workshops. Objects were selected by the Academic Engagement Curators in-consultation with the Business School educators who could access the collection via the Museum's online catalogue. We selected a seemingly disconnected objects from across the Museum collections. This was to expand the students' conceptualisation of leadership and challenge their perspectives on who they considered to be a leader. The objects represented a range of cultures, knowledge systems and social hierarchies, ranging from First Nations traditions and activists to ancient Roman Emperors and animal specimens. Once the objects were selected, the activities for the workshops were designed by the Academic Engagement Curators, employing their expert knowledge in OBL. Below we provide some examples of the OBL activities for the online and in-person workshops.

### *Online workshops*

Currently, the Museum's online catalogue provides access to a significant number of the almost half a million items in the Museum collection, with more items added regularly. Before the pandemic, the online catalogue functioned as a reference tool for the general public, and researchers around the world could access the collections. They could see some information about the item as well as high resolutions photographs. During the pandemic, the online catalogue became a vital learning and teaching tool to engage fully online and hybrid student groups with the collections and conduct digital OBL classes. This included the development of course-specific online catalogue pages, a single link that would take students to a curated group of objects, relevant to their class or assessment task. A 3D digital model archive on Sketchfab, also accessed through the online catalogue, allows students to 'digitally handle' and manipulate some of the objects in the collection, providing a unique learning experience.

For the online workshop delivered through Zoom, students were challenged to connect a magpie specimen to concepts of leadership (see Figure 1). They observed its physical characteristics including the impressive size of the specimen and the sharpness of its beak, opening the discussion to ideas of authority through prowess and skill. Students were then presented with recent reports that a group of Australian magpies, fitted with tracking devices by scientists hoping to collect behavioural data, surprised the researchers by working collaboratively to remove the devices from one another (Potvin, 2022). Students reflected on this story and discussed the characteristics and qualities of a leader that they perceive to be important. The discussion then focused on how successful leaders work to achieve their goals.

Examining a list of curated objects, students then applied and extended this thinking across various cultural contexts, including an inscribed ostrakon recording industrial action taken by skilled workers in ancient Egypt, a portrait of Australian civil rights activist Charles Perkins, and the Bust of the Prima Porta (Figure 1). They connected each object to the concept of leadership and examined how each contributed a different perspective on what makes a leader. Rather than analysing the characteristics of a corporate manager, students were removed from their comfort zone, encouraged to broaden their own perspective, to think deeply about what leadership is and which qualities are important. Working in small groups in Zoom breakout rooms, the students selected a small number of the digital Museum objects to present their own exhibit on leadership. This served to encourage the students to articulate their thoughts, listen carefully to their peers and to understand and highlight multiple perspectives. A variety of digital tools were used to facilitate the collaborative activity, including Padlets, live polling and quiz platforms. Working collaboratively through the task, students needed to synthesize their thinking through their object selection and by communicating a cohesive narrative that distilled what they considered to be important qualities of a leader.



**Figure 1: Collection of items from the Chau Chak Wing Museum**

### *In-person workshops*

For one of the activities in the in-person workshops, the selected objects were part of the Tin Sheds Poster Collection (Figure 2), which cover a broad range of topics on social and political action. The activities were designed to take the students through the stages of familiarization, deep observation, critical analysis, application and synthesis. In the familiarization stage, the students engaged in quick observation of the selected posters. Next, the students conducted deep observation of one poster as a group, and each student shared one unique observation, covering visual elements such as colour, symbols and text (Figure 2). In the pursuit of efficiency and decisiveness there is the danger of processing and analysing information without fully absorbing the evidence. In so doing we limit our capacity to approach problems in a holistic way that moves beyond our own lens of experience. The purpose of deep observation is to build a robust and multi-perspective foundation of information on which to base the next phases. This task challenged students to work slowly rather than rushing to quick decisions. Furthermore, OBL helps students interrogate artefacts “not purely as objects but as ‘portals’ of knowledge through which to examine the different ways knowledge is constructed” (Boddington, Boys & Speight, 2013, p.4). After the deep observation, students engaged in critical analysis focusing on purpose, motive, audience, message, and an evaluation of the effectiveness of each. Finally, the students applied their learnings by creating their own poster to communicate the main message of their own assessment projects. They presented their posters to their peers, combining their knowledge of communicating social action for leadership through a visual medium and their own research topic.

Following the workshop, one of the students commented that the workshop “deepened my understanding of creative visual cues in influencing others and conveying a message, qualities which are important to becoming an effective leader”. When reflecting on the leadership workshop, students referred to how the activities helped them draw “deeper meaning” and see leadership “in a new way”. Students mentioned how they were able to see leadership from spiritual perspective, which they hadn’t thought about before and how their “understanding of leadership expanded to include the importance of symbolism”. One of the challenges of museum and university partnership is evaluating the collaboration. How can a partnership be evaluated and how do we measure success? One way is to see if the aims of the collaboration have been met. In our case study it seems that the collaboration was successful in helping students conceptualise leadership beyond the normal tropes. We will share more results in future following the analysis of data from the second cycle of the project.



**Figure 2: Students engaging with OBL in the Chau Chak Wing Museum learning spaces**

## **Conclusion**

Museum and university partnerships present creative opportunities for student learning and for stimulating

dialogue across the two sectors, as well as engaging new audiences beyond the traditional disciplines. There is a potential for museums and higher education partnership to evolve into more than a one-off workshop and become an integral part of student enquiry process in both physical and digital spaces. The future of the dialogue between museums and universities could explore the role of hybrid spaces that enhance material presence of the objects in virtual environments and how these spaces support different ways of learning and teaching in higher education. In addition to the physical objects, digital museum collections provide novel and accessible ways of engaging with historical and cultural artefacts. OBL in the museum can extend student learning beyond the lecture theatre. It is an active and experiential approach to help students develop new and different ways of thinking about the world through time and from different cultural perspectives.

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