Docent Dispatch

"Blending" Docent Learning: Using Google Forms Quizzes to Increase Efficiency in Interpreter Education at Fort Henry

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The introduction of online elements to museums and cultural sites has opened up new ways for visitors to engage with the past, with nature, with culture, and all other treasures of the museum. By adopting new technologies and internet-based platforms, museums and cultural sites are able to expand their capacity to educate visitors. Unfortunately, the same attention has not yet been paid to the possibilities of incorporating internet-based technologies into the education of museum docents. Because docents or interpreters remain a primary point of contact for visitors to many of our sites, museum educators stand to benefit greatly from incorporating online elements into training routines. With interest in the online presence of museums growing, it is high time that docent educators begin to access the benefits of these technologies in their training regimes.

To develop a pedagogical framework that grafts the capacity of internet-based technologies onto existing interpreter training strategies, we can turn to the field of higher education. "Blended learning"—most simply defined as "an integration of face-to-face and online learning experiences" 1 —has become a growth area for scholars of teaching and learning in higher education, and our new steps in this direction can benefit from their decades of inquiry.

This article is broken down into four main sections. In the first section, a brief overview of the role of the internet in the museum is addressed, as well as the disconnect between docent and general museum education. Following this, a brief turn to the successes of online quizzes

and other internet-based and active-learning pedagogies are drawn in from the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL), a field of study of higher education programs. Third, we turn to the case study of "blended" docent learning at work, through the introduction of a Google Forms-based practice quiz to the interpreter education program at Fort Henry National Historic Site. Finally, the article concludes with three principles of blended docent learning, which outline the ways in which incorporating online elements to interpreter training can improve efficiency in the program. These quizzes are an example of blended docent learning because they were complementary supports to the preexisting docent training program at Fort Henry.

Technology, museums, and docent education

As mentioned in the introduction, there is a growing interest in the incorporation of internet-based technologies into the museum environment, and the development of the museum's online presence for general public education. The majority of the studies of virtual museum education have specifically focused on the K-12 group of students and their teachers.2 The online presences of museums and interpretive sites "play an important role in the emerging trend of blending informal and formal learning in the education sector because digital media have become a primary source of information … and thus, serve as a springboard for learning." 3 As Cordelia Chong and Diantha Smith point out, this blend of informal and formal learning settings offered by a site's online presence offers visitors "benefits from the structure proven in a for-

mal setting, without the pressure of formal assessment." 4 Furthermore, a study of the "flipped museum"—modelled on the "flipped classroom"—showed that digital media platforms for interpretive sites can foster active learning experiences for student visitors through greater personalizations of inperson/on-site learning opportunities, clarity of content by including the digital entrypoint, and unstructured peer-to-peer social learning opportunities through conversation.5 Museum educators must continue to explore these platforms to ensure that they are prepared for the twenty-first-century visitor—new "museum users [who] move fluidly between online in-person engagement." 6

While these studies and tools offer a great deal to advance the position of the museum educator vis-à-vis the visitor, there is a notable difference in the specific role of incorporating technology into docent learning and the training of interpreters. While calls for a technologically enhanced "cyberdocent" have echoed since at least 1999,7 these inquiries into the docent–technology nexus are visitor-centric. This focus is fairly typical for the study of museum education, and non-profit specialist Tina Nolan's call to action for museum educators to "reposition … from the margins of our institutions to the center" 8 is one example of the visitor-facing role of museum education—one that risks overlooking the integral process of docent education. Robin S. Grenier, Associate Professor at the University of Connecticut, notes that we do not always practice what we preach when it comes to the training of our own interpreters, and there is often a divide between the "espoused theory"—the way in which we expect our visitors to engage with our site—and our "theory in use"—the way in which we engage our docents.9 This intervention into blending docent learning seeks to close the gap between our espoused theory of the benefits of technology in the museum—where a rich pedagogy has developed to foster active, social, and informal learning opportunities—and the theory in use for education of ourselves—docent education.

Integrating the lessons of blended learning from higher education classrooms into our own docent education not only builds on the technological opening of new spaces for visitor experiences, but also allows for a new area of growth for studies of docent training programs. Studies of docents following adult learning theory have pointed to the importance of continuing educational opportunities for docents to develop expertise in their fields,10 be-

yond the simple memorization of applicable facts of that museum or historic site.11 These have included case studies of experiential learning,12 and of programs designed to boost docent confidence through targeted skill development such as improvisation,13 strategies for overcoming student disengagement,14 and shared leadership.15

Lessons from higher education

SoTL researchers across many fields of study have noted the potential benefits of blending online elements into higher education programs. While some attention has been paid to student-to-student interactions in comment forums,16 a growing number of studies have engaged the benefits of online quizzes, for formative self-assessment or as an opportunity for feedback from instructors. Online quizzes in undergraduate exercise and medical physiology courses generally resulted in improved performance for summative exams,17 and undergraduate geography courses showed evidence of increased geographic literacy after online quiz programs.18 These quizzes are not formal assessments, but informal opportunities for students to self-assess anonymously without the pressures associated with identified summative testing.

Online quizzes offer "a simple way to provide active learning activities and possible improve retention of information presented" in person by creating opportunities to review.19 These benefits in information retention and active engagement with quiz interfaces are not entirely dependent upon timely feedback, as tracked by a recent business education article.20 Stronger correlations exist between improved results and time spent on quizzes by the student, 21 or the opportunity for students to retake the quizzes multiple times.22 Perhaps most importantly for institutions facing budgetary pressures, many online interfaces—such as Google Forms—are a low-(or no-)cost intervention on the part of the instructor, meeting a biology department's goal to "gain maximum educational benefit from minimal output." 23 Thus, higher education research across a number of disciplines shows that integrating an online quiz open for repeat access into a blend-

ed educational program offers students the greatest possible increase in summative assessment performance, with little-to-no financial commitment on the part of the instructor. Secondly, given that feedback is a secondary indicator of success, there is a minimal time commitment for this blended program, largely comprised of the initial set-up of the quiz. As discussed above, given the familiarity with post-secondary education that many interpreters have, museums and cultural sites have much to gain by consulting best practices of progressive higher education pedagogy.

Blending docent learning at Fort Henry

Each summer since 1938, Fort Henry National Historic Site operates as a living history museum.24 Interpretation at Fort Henry is almost exclusively comprised of university and college students working a summer job. As such, docents must be trained at the beginning of each summer for their roles, and must pass a summative assessment—known as the "Guide Test"—before they are allowed to lead tourists and school groups. Guide Test is a traditional closed-book, in-person assessment. Docent education at the site is led by returning interpreters. Budget cutbacks have reduced the number of military and domestic interpreters since peak levels in the 1980s and 1990s, respectively.25 Despite growth in some areas of museums, the trend toward "doing more with less" is far from unique to Fort Henry, and indeed it was named as the top trend across the whole interpretive profession in a 2004 study.26 Reductions in staff and training time require new strategies for interpreter education.

In the summer of 2017, the guiding department rolled out an online practice quiz for the Guide Test, to prepare new and returning staff in addition to the teaching periods in the workday. This Google Forms-based quiz complemented prior educational strategies— the reading of guide manuals and on-location lectures given by returning interpreters— with an interactive online component. Blending these learning opportunities together created a more active learning environment, not only by providing an informal opportunity for self-assessment, but also by flipping the lesson-planning process. In-person training time led by returning staff could be devoted to tour etiquette, group management, and narrative rather than focusing on content.27 This draws on the benefits of the "flipped classroom" and other active learning pedagogies, where students engage with the material, rather than mere passive recep-

tion.28 Quiz responses were anonymous, and interpreters could attempt the quiz as many times as they wished29 to help retain necessary information. The practice quiz was comprised of a variety of important questions from the Guide Test, including questions about the history of the Fort, important dates such as the reign of Queen Victoria, and the daily programming schedule for the summer tourist season at Fort Henry, among others. These pieces of information would later be assessed in the Guide Test. Each question was answered by selecting checkboxes (i.e. "select all that apply") or multiple choice. The application also allows for short answer, paragraph, dropdown, linear scale, grid, date, and time responses; however, by limiting questions to multiple choice and checkboxes, the quiz did not demand a great time commitment on the part of the interpreter. Staff members were encouraged to take the quiz as often as they wished, to help prepare them for the test and become more comfortable with the information pertaining to the site.

Google Forms offered a number of benefits for docent training. First, the application is free of cost to the guiding department as well as to the individual interpreters. The anonymity aspect was of particular importance because it allowed interpreters the freedom of formative self-assessment to guide further study and preparation without the potential to be linked to their quiz result. The accessible interface of Google Forums allowed the guiding department to have a rough idea of information retention and test preparedness through the "responses" tab, to direct their review periods with interpreters. This feedback allows for greater efficiency in planning lessons and time allotment for the docent education program, and the creation of blended learning opportunities allows interpreters another method to deepen their comprehension and attention to information necessary for summative assessment.

Three principles of blended docent learning

The experience of blending docent learning at Fort Henry demonstrates one ap-

proach to the addition of internet-based training modules to interpreter training. As museum educators look to increase efficiency in staff training programs, free and accessible programs like Google Forms offer three main benefits.

(1) Economize time of interpreters

At heritage, natural, cultural, and other interpretive sites bringing in new staff each summer, the steep learning curve for the rookie docents coupled with pressure to have these new interpreters ready as soon as possible to lead interpretive programing. Recognizing this, a decision to offer blended learning opportunities economizes the in-person and on-site elements of docent education and allows for a more active learning environment. More information-oriented elements of the interpreters' training can be reinforced with online quiz components, and the in-person time can be allocated toward the "personal touches" of interpretation30—anything from time and space management around the site, to reviews of visitors' common questions, or even to more advanced docent training. This can offer greater consistency for visitors to a site, and allow for a sharing of best practices between more experienced interpreters and those just learning.31 Similarly, locations with more stable teams of docents can prepare staff for new exhibits or refresh familiarity with existing exhibits with ease.

(2) Use data to direct further training

By hosting blended elements like online quizzes on free-to-use sites like Google Forms, instructors have access to a live-updating dataset to structure future in-person/on-site docent training toward improving specific outcomes. For instance, a quick glance at the online quiz results tab would highlight to an instructor that interpreters appear particularly strong in section A of the tour route but require more time in section B or C. By drawing on that dataset during the lesson-planning stage, the instructor's time is more efficiently targeted toward areas requiring improvement rather than doubling-up on already strong areas.

(3) Encourage feedback during and after online elements

By encouraging feedback from participants both during and after use of online elements, docent educators can improve question formatting for future training sessions. Because online

applications like Google Forms allow for typed responses, the feedback collection can become integrated with the operation of the quizzes themselves.

As museum educators continue to enhance their online presence, there is an equally important opportunity to create new online elements of staff training. In the second section of this article, I reviewed one of the ways in which SoTL researchers have developed online elements to blend into their classroom teaching—online quizzes. The successful introduction of these online quizzes into a blended learning program at Fort Henry National Historic Site demonstrates how lessons from SoTL can be applied into the museum education environment. The rich literature developing around active and blended learning pedagogies in SoTL is a wellspring of new ideas for museum educators to draw from, as we seek to develop new programs to support staff training and optimize visitor experiences at our sites.32 It is my hope that this article is the first of many to take this approach.

About the Author:

Michael P. A. Murphy is a doctoral candidate in International Relations at the University of Ottawa. He was recently an Ensign in the Fort Henry Guard and received the FHG Club of Canada Award for Guard of the Year in 2016. He has published peer-reviewed articles in the Journal of Political Power, the Journal of Political Science Education, and Sport in Society: Cultures, Commerce, Media Politics. He has presented at conferences on philosophy, innovative pedagogy, refugee studies, and political science.

*Please note there are footnotes throughout the article, but they have not been included here due to the length. If you would like to view these, please let Allison know.