Wisdom Papers: Introduction

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We undertook the *Making Objects Speak* project with the conviction that museums and the built environment, including neighborhoods, are vital sites for *student* learning. Yet, as these wisdom papers suggest, the development of effective visual culture and site-specific pedagogy also entails a learning curve for the *teacher/tour creator*. We hope not only that our completed pod casts will serve as valuable examples of what can be produced, but also that this record of our processes of trial and error and self-questioning will prove useful to future tour-creators. The pedagogical learning curves described by each tour creator reveal several recurring themes, united by the overarching theme that the pod cast tour is a unique *genre* and a hybrid *medium*, and thus it poses its own pedagogical, formal, and technical challenges.

Although many of our tour creators began this project with experience in using visual culture in their courses, in creating museum-based assignments, and/or in taking field trips with their students, they had not worked in the pod cast genre before. Pat Licklider, the creator of multiple tours in the Greek and Roman galleries at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, explained at our revision workshop that we need to factor in the student's lack of familiarity — with this museum in particular and with museums in general. Navigation, orientation, terminology, strategies of reading objects as well as labels and wall texts: these skills and experiences could not be taken for granted. Along the same lines, the tour creators experienced their own episodes of unfamiliarity,

disorientation, dislocation, and lack of expertise. The project participants benefited from workshops with peers and museum professionals, and from guidelines, comments on multiple drafts, and a suggested reading list in visual culture and museum studies. Yet, like our students, we gather knowledge and incorporate it into our practice incrementally, experientially, in a gradual process that leads to a product over time.

The tour creators did, of course, draw on their classroom teaching expertise for solutions. In their wisdom paper, for example, Delia Mellis and Cindy Lobel, co-creators of the *Harlem Renaissances* walking tour, share the discovery that a pod cast tour resembles the classroom learning experience insofar as both provide a "beginning point": teachers pose well-timed questions which, in some cases, are only answered by students over an extended, indeterminate period, one that extends beyond the tour, just as it would extend beyond the end of a class period or a semester. The contrasts between pod cast and classroom instruction, however, are equally striking and instructive. Valerie Allen, creator of the *Medieval Pilgrimage* tour at the Cloisters, observes that the museum environment needs to be taken into account as a three-dimensional "medium of learning" and not a "reading room." Learning from specific objects will thus benefit from a process of visual questioning that incorporates both looking *at* and looking *around*. Similarly, Megan Elias, creator of the *Global Appetites* tour at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, suggests that the pod cast should not be equated with the lecture hall. Instead, we should regard the museum as a resource, a curatorial opportunity to invite and demonstrate cogent connections.

Perhaps the greatest pedagogical challenge is also a potential opportunity: students may be under our sphere of influence and expertise, but as tour-takers they are

independent and self-reliant in ways they would not be in the classroom or on a traditional guided tour. When taking a pod cast tour, students listen to our voices, follow a prescribed path, find designated objects, engage in slow active looking, and respond to questions and embedded learning activities. However, they are also free to become distracted, to get lost, to fail to find, and even to remain unmoved by the objects/sites we have so carefully selected for their visual interest and historical or literary resonance. How, then, do we allow for that dual state of being? How do we both engage their thoughtful attention and accommodate individual dispositions? How do we develop an overall plan that keeps our audiences both engaged and free to daydream and explore? Pat Licklider suggests that music, well chosen and well placed, might offer that "open space" for wandering *and* enhance listener attention.

One of the most daunting formal challenges arises from the transience of objects and the impermanence of sites included in these tours. Museum displays are always subject to change and even the most highly valued and well-known works may be placed in the storeroom**,** moved to another location or loaned to another institution**.** Similarly, the built environment is not static — buildings are repurposed, closed to the public, or even demolished. How, then, do we allow for the fugitive nature of our materials? Jean Mills, creator of the *Make It New-Modernist Visions* tour at the Museum of Modern Art, confronts this in terms of the object / theme quandary. She finds that, while a central theme or essential question may be the key to a tour's success, this theme must be flexible and expansive enough to allow for the rotation of objects and for different ways of seeing. Valerie Allen cautions that, although the museum setting helps to establish connections among certain objects, we cannot rely too heavily on these potentially

fluctuating contexts and contents. As she faces unpredictability and evanescence in the built environment, Carol Groneman, creator of *Discovering Immigrant New York*, a walking tour of New York City's Lower East Side, notes that, on a neighborhood walking tour, some destinations may be hard to find, have been dramatically altered, or have disappeared. We can work with this, however, by encouraging students to become "historical detectives," to persevere, create their own momentum, and make their own discoveries.

That process of discovery also becomes a priority when we lack information about the lives and historical contexts of objects that are on display. In this context Ed Paulino, creator of the *Converging Cultures* tour at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, discovers the importance of extensive consultation with his specialist adviser. He raises the issue of how much we still need to learn when we are within our area of specialization but out of our element, seeking to interpret objects rather than documents and other written texts. We may also have resistance to certain themes, although they announce themselves through the objects on display and insist on recognition. Jane Mushabac, creator of the *Civil War Stories* tour, recounts how she had to overcome her "resistance to the topic of war" and look / listen to the stories told by works of art in the collections of the New-York Historical Society. The primacy of the object, as Valerie Allen reminds us, is one facet of the museum learning experience we may be least prepared to accommodate. If we are accustomed to regarding objects as means to an end — as illustrations of an idea rather than ends in themselves — then we will miss a valuable opportunity.

The substantial technical challenges (for most if not all tour creators) involve not only *how* to record, edit, arrive at appropriate timing, and add sound effects. They involve *when* we might want to exploit subtle effects of variation in voice, including a change of narrator, or when we might want the spoken word to yield to other sounds in order to achieve a scenic shift. Yet distinctions between pedagogical, formal, and technical elements are themselves out of place in the unique realm of the pod cast. The challenges they pose are part of the intricate web of related questions, answers and decisions addressed in these wisdom papers.