

Plan C for Curate: Teaching Studio History and Museum Studies in the Twenty-First Century

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MUSEUMS ARE EVERYWHERE. Even a walk in the woods might bring you face-to-face with a historical exhibit. Along the Northern Rail Trail in Franklin, New Hampshire, I came across an old train yard with an interpretive sign indicating, “the granite blocks you are looking at are all that remains of this eighteenth-century railroad table.” Of course, trains did not cross the region until the nineteenth century. Not far from this example of inaccurate history, I came upon a different outdoor display with black and white panels featuring beautiful old pictures of small stations that had once stood along the tracks. A local high school had created these fine interpretations, correctly stating that railroads fueled the growth of mill towns along New England’s raging rivers. That walk revealed both the perils and promise of public history exhibits.

These panels also suggested that there is nothing new about classes constructing historical exhibits. What has changed is our increasing need to do so—and not merely to get the facts straight. Teaching creatively at the intersection of historical and museum studies offers new opportunities to engage our students. At Georgia Tech, undergraduates can take a social science general education class



Figure 1: Students getting ready for an exhibit at the Georgia Tech Clough Student Center (Courtesy of Carla Gerona).

in our history program called “Introduction to Museum Studies.” Originally the brainchild of August Giebelhaus, a historian with a certificate in material culture, and Cindy Bowden, then Director of the Robert C. Williams Paper Museum, the class culminates in a student-created historical exhibit. Since Giebelhaus retired, I have taught the class six times, and have become more convinced of this course’s immense value—not just for students who are planning careers in museums. Curation has become a crucial skill for all.

This essay seeks to share useful guidelines for other historians who would like to teach such classes, so that more of us can add history studios to our curriculum offerings. Most historians, including myself, have little or no formal training in museum studies, and we do much of our teaching in lecture halls and seminar rooms. I believe that we can—and should—change this pattern, and this essay describes several different methods that I have used over the years. The first two times I taught “Introduction to Museum Studies,” I benefited from my collaboration with the Williams Paper Museum in what I will call the “museum-centered model.” From this experience, I learned about the benefits of extending our classrooms into our communities. However, in 2013, the museum closed to

repair a broken foundation. With no access to the collections and the staff's expertise, what was I to do? I chose to teach the class solo. For the next two classes, drawing on what I had learned at the museum, I taught a "history-centered model" studio that resulted in two outstanding student shows. By teaching alone, I also began to explore the unique perspectives that historians bring to the table. But creating these yearly shows was hard work, especially due to the high standards I had developed in the museum. There had to be another way. In response, I worked out a more systematic "Portfolio-to-Panel" history-centered approach intended to simplify the process. This essay recounts my unusual journey into studio teaching, and I hope that my experience with curation will inspire other historians to take the plunge and bring history studios to more students.

I. Curatorial Turns (And Why Historians Should Teach Studio Classes)

Georgia Tech is in Atlanta, a cultural mecca of the U.S. South. As soon as travelers arrive at the Hartsfield-Jackson Airport, they can view an exhibit about the city, punctuated by Martin Luther King Jr.'s passionate words on overhead monitors. Within walking distance of the downtown convention center, visitors can choose from the African-American Panoramic Experience (APEX Museum) or the new National Center for Human and Civil Rights. A short street car ride will take them to the Martin Luther King, Jr. National Historic Park and Birthplace. Farther afield, the Atlanta History Center stands out for its historical exhibits, house tours, and its latest acquisition, *Cyclorama: The Big Picture*—a giant nineteenth-century monumental painting that once traveled from place to place drawing large crowds to Civil War reenactments. Atlanta's "Disneyfied" museums, such as the World of Coca-Cola, are also rooted in history. Even the city's non-profit art and science museums feature historical exhibits such as "Go West! Art of the American Frontier" and "Searching for the Queen of Sheba." One of our more popular—and controversial—tourist spots is Stone Mountain, with its Antebellum Village, Confederate Hall, lights show, and, of course, three Southern Generals carved into the mountain. In Atlanta, the need for people trained in historical curation is everywhere in plain sight. While other cities or towns might not have Atlanta's rich

resources, they all have histories. And communities want curators, consultants, and others well versed in historical thinking.

Many programs already teach public history in various forms. For example, in 1966, the “Foxfire Approach” was developed by Eliot Wigginton, an educator in the northeast mountains. This student-centered teaching method was rooted in documenting local Appalachian culture and led to a student journal publication and national acclaim; by 1974, Foxfire expanded into a 106-acre museum and hands-on-classroom.¹ Less than one hundred miles away, on the other side of the Chattahoochee National Forest, is the Chief Vann House Historic Site, featuring tours of the wealthy Cherokee leader’s home. At that site, Tiya Miles and her University of Michigan students worked on a booklet, *African American History at the Chief Vann House*, that was “intended to illuminate, commemorate, and contextualize the lives of enslaved Africans and African Americans who labored on the Vann plantation.”² Following their work, the site now hosts an enslaved Africans exhibit. At the college level, most students who are fortunate enough to participate in these innovative history courses usually enroll in upper-level classes or matriculate in Museum and Historical Preservation Programs.

But why not follow Foxfire’s example and recognize the value of drawing in wider swaths of students? Keith A. Erikson has argued that “signature pedagogy” for historians should focus on historical practices—around archives and podiums—because these are the “places” where historians “do history.”³ Extending Erikson’s line of thinking, exhibits offer important sites to create useful learning experiences. As one of my students noted anonymously, “The best aspect of this course was the ability to learn by doing. We learned not only a huge chunk of history, but also how to create an effective museum exhibit in one semester...all by doing!”

For historians and museum professionals, there is a growing sense of anxiety—a fear of irrelevancy that encompasses much of the humanities. This alarm is practical, based on numbers and on dollars. As Cary Carson of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation notes, museums, especially historic homes, have experienced plummeting attendance and thus might soon go the way of drive-in movies or the Scarsdale Diet, headed on a “nosedive to oblivion.”⁴ Meanwhile, James Grossman, Executive Director of the American Historical Association, reports troubling figures. Since 2007, the history

major has declined from 2.2% of all undergraduates to 1.7%.⁵ Yet both scholars offer a way forward. Carson recounts the “Plan A” of museums—new outreach and educational programming. His “Plan B” is to encourage visitors to be more involved in the story making.⁶ Grossman, too, engages more directly with the public in his *Los Angeles Times* op-ed, “History Isn’t a ‘Useless’ Major. It Teaches Critical Thinking, Something America Needs Plenty More Of.”⁷ In our unstable environment, in which students can expect multiple career changes, I believe there is great benefit in adopting a “Plan C”—for critical thinking and for curating—and not just for history majors.

Historians have always taught such higher-order skills in the core curriculum. To think like a historian is to collect, track, analyze, synthesize, and source data. We also ask the big questions—among the most important, why does this matter? We make the past relatable to the present. This is critical thinking at the deepest level, yet we also participate in teaching other university core concepts. Historians help students develop skills, particularly writing and public speaking, and we should continue to do so. Increasingly, however, communication competencies involve a visual component, for historians and their students—just like curating.

Over the centuries, there have been many “curatorial turns.” The term “curate” comes from the Latin word *curare*, meaning “to take care of,” originally linked to a religious mission, as in the Spanish priest (*cura*) or an Anglican curate. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, “curate” took on another meaning as collectors assembled and cared for unusual, exotic, precious, or rare items in “cabinets of curiosities.”⁸ Beginning in the late nineteenth century, the curator became a professional expert who selected and displayed treasures often in “brick-and-mortar museums” and “white cubes” that catered to elites.⁹ By the end of the century, institutions responded to groundbreaking social and cultural groundswells, increasingly paying attention to wider audiences, including schoolchildren. History exhibits expanded their scope to reflect local, revisionist, and “bottom-up” perspectives, sometimes inviting controversy in the process.¹⁰

At the same time, museum work became increasingly bureaucratic and rationalized—and devoted to museum “mission statements.” In some museums, curators still do it all; others outsource their projects to private companies. The largest institutions have

departments specializing in accessioning, preserving, educating, and evaluating, while curators focus their attention on exhibit design—some describing themselves as artists.¹¹ Most recently, curation has moved into electronic spaces. In semi-jest, Lianne McTavish notes that the virtual tour of the Rijksmuseum means there is “no reason to go the real Rijksmuseum.”¹² More seriously, McTavish points out that Internet exhibits “can include a broad array of voices—voices which challenge elitist museum practices.”¹³ Meanwhile, in yet another twist, some museums are experimenting with “crowdsourcing”—allowing anyone to send in objects for an exhibit and further democratizing curation.¹⁴

This brings us to the latest trend in curation—the larger public’s appropriation of the word. Up until the early 1990s, the use of the word “curate” was on a long and steady decline, according to my NGram data analysis of sources digitized in Google Books.¹⁵ The winds have since shifted and usage has increased on popular Internet sites such as Reddit.¹⁶ People are using the verb “to curate” in new ways. Individuals curate their social media. Organizations curate their websites. Specialists can help curate music lists, spice racks, or beer collections. Any informed selection is curation. Some museum professionals might chafe at this new use of an old term, but the reality is that more and more people are doing (and have to do) what curators have always done: not just selecting, but also combining visuals and texts to tell a story. More than ever, curators can enhance students’ critical understanding of this process by doing some old-fashioned curation in the classroom, and historians can too. Curating, like writing, has become an essential skill for the engineering, computing, and history major alike.

II. Collaboration in Museum-Centered Models and Beyond

What steps can historians take to have successful classes and exhibits that teach curation? If I was going to boil this down to one answer, it is to get outside of the classroom and learn from the experts. As you start planning a studio class, look around. Think about your local resources. Do you have a museum on campus or in town that would like to do a project with you? Do you have access to any unique archival collections at your university or in a neighboring library? Is there a historical site or park that could provide assistance? My

classes have worked in all of these settings, with professionals who generously shared their time and resources—and knowledge.

Museum-Centered Collaborations

If you are fortunate to find a museum partner, and can teach out of a museum—great. You will learn so much. I first co-taught this studio class with Cindy Bowden in the Williams Paper Museum, with its vast holdings of paper-related artifacts centered on the collections of William Joseph Hunter (1883-1966), or as his friends (and my students) called him, “Dard.”¹⁷ A participant in the Arts and Crafts Movement, Hunter preserved handcrafted papermaking techniques before industrial machinery made them obsolete. He wrote books about papermaking and made his own books by hand, from start to finish. Our class met in a studio used for papermaking workshops, sandwiched between the museum’s permanent exhibit and storage area classes, and students could easily access Hunter’s great collection. The partnership resulted in two very different exhibits.

Director Bowden’s insights went far beyond her knowledge of the museum’s collections. She understood—as does every museum specialist—that museums exist in communities. As John H. Falk and Lynn D. Dierking state, museums are placing increasing “emphasis on the visitor experience.”¹⁸ Along those lines, the first question Bowden taught us to ask was, “Who is your intended audience?” Answers partially hinge on exhibit location. My students always chose other students, faculty, and campus visitors as targets, as they built shows in various Georgia Tech Galleries (the museum, the library, the student center, and our department). Most colleges will have such spaces, but if you want something less public, your classroom walls will do.

When Bowden and I co-taught and supervised the exhibit, “Papermaking: An American Revolution,” we adapted the syllabus that Giebelhaus and Bowden had used the previous year. As our main textbook, we read the incredibly comprehensive *The Manual of Museum Exhibitions* by Barry Lord and Gail Dexter Lord.¹⁹ The book explained every aspect of museum design and operations, from proper lighting techniques to operating museum stores. Each chapter closed with case studies that provided great examples of curation in many different settings. I learned a ton that year about museums and exhibits, and about paper, too. So did our students. Bowden



Figure 2: “Paper Trail: The Travels of Dard Hunter” student exhibit in Georgia Tech’s Robert C. Williams Paper Museum (Courtesy of Robert E. Desrochers Jr.).

assembled a wide array of museum professionals to give talks about acquiring collections, archival storage, exhibition building, disability services, educational programming, and public relations. As in other history classes, students also did extensive reading and writing. They researched papermaking history in America for their midterm exam, making use of the library’s special collections reading room. At this point, the class created a collective plan or storyboard on a whiteboard, but the design and assembly largely relied on Bowden’s knowledge. Working with a museum gave the class a collection to mine. Equally important, we collaborated with professionals who knew their rich holdings and how best to display and secure them. The museum’s program manager, education curator, multiple interns, and work-study students all worked hard to make the show a success. In this scenario, the students (and the history professor) act as trainees, apprentices, or interns, which resembles many real-world workplaces.

The second time I co-taught the class in the museum, I worked with the new Director, Teri Williams, and the students created an exhibit called “Paper Trail: The Travels of Dard Hunter” (**Figure 2**). Williams came from a curating background, and we decided to cut

back on the outside visitors to make the exhibit an even more central component. Both of us wanted students to take a greater lead in curating the show. I provided introductory historical lectures for context and students began their research early; they read Dard Hunter's biography, autobiography, letters, and other pertinent files. The students learned about Hunter's travels, initially across the United States in his brother's magic show; later, to Mexico, Polynesia, China, Japan, Thailand, and India, where he met Gandhi. Students located artifacts with the finding aids. Despite this more student-centered approach, the class could not have completed such a professional-looking exhibit on time without the museum staff.

History-Centered Collaborations

The following year, when I taught the class out of the history department, we continued to collaborate with the Williams Paper Museum staff, visiting the museum for informative presentations and excellent behind-the-scenes tours. Teaching outside the museum also offered new opportunities to collaborate with other people and explore different topics. For example, the fourth time I taught the class, I had been planning an exhibit about the Etowah Mounds and Hernando de Soto—a subject that related to my own research. Then in 2015, I joined the planning committee for the Interdisciplinary Nineteenth-Century Studies Conference, themed “Mobilities,” at Georgia Tech. I suggested a concurrent student exhibit, and the committee welcomed the idea. So much for Mississippians and *conquistadores*—I needed a nineteenth-century topic. Meanwhile, the Sports Studies Program hired Smithsonian National Museum of American History Fellow, Jennifer Sterling, who pointed me to an old cache of team pictures in the Georgia Tech Special Collections. I scheduled a meeting with the archivists, and found a treasure trove of material for students to explore. That spring, the “Mobilities” conference opened with “Game Changer: The Evolution of Nineteenth-Century Sports,” with visitors from all over the country and world.²⁰

Despite the lack of a formal Public History or Museum Studies program, Georgia Tech established a reputation as a place to do museum work. The Georgia Humanities Council invited us to evaluate proposals for their Hometown Sports Exhibits. In the fall of 2015, the Bobby Jones Golf Course asked us to curate a show



Figure 3: “A Walk in the Park: Exploring the History of Atlanta’s Recreational Spaces” student exhibit in Georgia Tech’s School of History, in the Old Civil Engineering Building (Courtesy of Carla Gerona).

about the landmark Supreme Court decision, *Holmes v. Atlanta*, which desegregated parks and recreational spaces. Sterling led a group of interns to create an exhibit at the golf course clubhouse. They wove together the personal story of African American golfer Alfred “Tup” Holmes with the public battle to desegregate American institutions, in theory, if not in practice. As a consultant on the exhibit, I realized that my museum studies class could create a sister exhibit on campus, and in 2016, my students curated “A Walk in the Park: Exploring the History of Atlanta’s Recreational Spaces” (**Figure 3**). That topic led to the next one. In 2017, I let my students choose any decade in Atlanta’s history as their subject, and they curated “Ideas and Edifices: Atlanta’s Explosive Sixties.” Six classes; six topics; many communities.

One of the most powerful moments in any of my courses came when the class working on parks visited their sister exhibit, “*Holmes v. Atlanta*.” Holmes’s youngest son, Michael Holmes, regaled the

class with stories, and concluded by comparing a picture of his father to that of the famous white golfer Bobby Jones. Holmes asked the students to imagine how far “Tup” might have gone if he had been able to play in the same leagues. I had already introduced lectures and film clips about the Civil Rights Era, but Holmes’s talk—in conjunction with the exhibit—made the issue come to life for the students. This is what a powerful history exhibit strives to do. With that visit to “*Holmes v. Atlanta*,” a circle of collaboration had been completed, from classroom to community and back to classroom again, and the circle didn’t close. Michael Holmes would introduce me to the Director of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Collection at Morehouse College—and so another opportunity awaits.

Collaborations and Employment

Going outside of the classroom offers rich opportunities to collaborate, but creating spaces for your students to work with each other is equally important—and particularly challenging. Today’s workplaces require people to form teams, and employers want employees who can brainstorm and cooperate effectively—just the kinds of skills that “Introduction to Museum Studies” cultivates. In all my classes, students have divided into groups to complete their exhibits. Mostly, students share, listen, and compromise. Some teams work well when everyone agrees to follow an especially effective leader. Highly functional groups find ways to share a vision and divide tasks equally. But some students just do not get along. There can be too many chiefs. Alternatively, no one wants to take charge. Less functional groups will often have one or more members who just do not show up. In those cases, someone has to pick up the slack.

Dealing with difficult group situations is excellent practice for real life and future jobs, but it might not be great for your classroom community—or the class exhibit. To a degree, I have alleviated group problems using the following techniques: (1) I assign or reassign groups to create a good mix of students; (2) students sign up for supervised volunteer hours; (3) students do (or at least start) group work in class; (4) students complete self-reports and peer-grading; (5) I emphasize skills, telling students, for example, that they will be able to share experiences from this class on job interviews; (6) I emphasize service—reminding students that exhibits enhance

public spaces and bring people together; and (7) we complete the exhibit early—well before final projects and exams. I have found that despite employing all of these methods, some students still struggle with teamwork. Students are not employees.

III. Key Principles for History-Centered Exhibits

When I redesigned the syllabus to be taught out of our history department, I could have changed the class structure. I might have designed a readings course about museums across time, or I could have constructed a course around Atlanta's historical sites. While either of these ideas (or a hybrid) presented great options, I did not want to let go of what had become the most central component of the course—the opportunity to build a historical exhibit. But was curating an exhibit out of our history department even feasible? Yes. For the next two classes, I took what I had learned at the museum and adapted it for a history program. As before, students filled gallery spaces with pictures, words, and stories. What changed was a further recalibration towards interpreting the past. The class would underscore historical methods and historical content, and class readings drew more explicitly on the field of public history. In the end, I found that teaching curation in a history department was not only feasible, it was vital.²¹

My first challenge was finding a good topic along with something to display, since I had no museum storeroom. The first time the students created a history-centered exhibit, I chose the Chief Vann House Historical Site as our main subject. Unlike Tiya Miles, I did not work on the Georgia Cherokee, but when I visited the state park, I immediately recognized a vibrant story that would engage my students. A slave owner, negotiator, trader, and polygamist, Chief James Vann invited the Moravians to found a school adjacent to the plantation. Ten years after Vann's mysterious murder, President James Madison spent the night at the lavish home that Vann's son inherited, contrary to Cherokee custom. When Georgians found gold in the mountains a few years later, the state evicted the Vann family, who moved out west with their slaves shortly before the roundups and larger removals known as the "Trail of Tears." This topic had it all—drama, documents, and visuals. Good contextual readings and primary sources abounded. The students would have no trouble developing a great show that would draw in their audiences.²²

Creating a Core Idea for a Historical Exhibit

In *The Manual of Museum Exhibitions*, Lord and Lord define what makes exhibits unique—above all, exhibits need a strong **core idea** that leads viewers to experience an “aha! moment.” Exhibits, they note, are not libraries, schools, churches, films, trade fairs, or amusement parks; I would also add that they are not history books. An exhibit seeks to reach its public in a different way, and, in most cases, curators are trying to connect with larger communities: young and old, novices and experts, and so on. To do this, Lord and Lord state that you want your visitors to “have a good time, and in the course of that pleasurable experience [visitors] should begin to discover a new or broadened interest in or valuation of the subject matter of the exhibition.”²³ An exhibit, they point out, should “transform some aspect of the visitor’s interests, attitudes or values affectively, due to the visitor’s discovery of some level of meaning in the objects on display.”²⁴ Of course, historians who write books or articles also want their readers to have pleasurable experiences, perhaps even affective ones. However, the equation is different.

Identifying the Assets for a Historical Exhibit

If a history book is not the same as a museum exhibit, a history exhibit is also not the same as an art exhibit. Teaching “Introduction to Museum Studies” out of the history department has led me to sharpen my understanding of these differences. While most history exhibits will feature objects or artifacts (e.g., costumes and weapons, or maybe an entire house or ship), a history exhibit can, and usually does, create museum magic in other ways, particularly with carefully chosen words. To lead students through the curation of historical exhibits, I have settled on a formula that simplifies the process for a semester-long class. Students assemble the following **assets** for their exhibit: (1) a visual base, (2) interpretive labels, and what I have come to call (3) the iconic quote. As students conduct research and assemble these three assets, they develop their core idea. Like a thesis statement for a research paper, finalizing this core idea is a dialectical process. To be sure, these elements represent a much-simplified version of what curators do, but it gets students thinking about the relationship between texts, visuals, and how they work together to support their goals.²⁵



Figure 4: Student photograph of the Vann House at the Chief Vann House Historical Site (Courtesy of Wang “Wayne” Lee).

To offer a more detailed description of the three assets in my formula, a **visual base** can come from a collection, an archive, or the Internet. Students can even create their own visuals. For “A Plantation and Its People,” my students took amazing pictures at the Vann House Historical Park that became the focal point of the exhibit (**Figure 4**). They also built a model of the Vann grounds, one of the more popular elements in the show. While you can create a strong history exhibit without artifacts, it would be much harder to omit words. Even a house tour with no written panels will use a tour guide for interpretation. Therefore, the second asset includes the **interpretive labels** that help students to build their story. In *Making Exhibit Labels: A Step-by-Step Guide*, Beverly Serrell favors the idea that “labels should address the average visitor,” further noting that all labels must serve a clear identifiable purpose.²⁶ Although Serrell introduces many different kinds of labels, I have my students focus on two particular types: context setting and interesting anecdotes that add color to the exhibit. No matter what, such labels should be short, to the point, and grab the viewer’s interest. The third asset, the **iconic quote**—is both a visual and a textual element. History shows will often feature key quotations in oversized lettering that get at the heart of an exhibit. For example, in “Paper Trail,” my students

chose to depict Dard Hunter's alienation with industrialization using his own words: "The machine age has unfolded before my eyes, a prosaic age that does not appeal to me."²⁷ These three assets (visuals, labels, and quotes) provide excellent building blocks for a history exhibit. This, of course, does not preclude you or your students from adding more bells and whistles, such as timelines, film loops, or scan codes that link to further information.

Developing an Exhibit Brief for a Historical Exhibit

Once students have conducted research and compiled assets, they can start more formal planning and incorporate their core idea into an **exhibit brief**. These short summaries draw on student findings as they begin to articulate their exhibit plans. Students describe what they want to do and how they will proceed. As I like to remind them, an exhibit brief is similar to the kind of description you might write for a grant proposal or a business plan. What is their core idea? What items would they like to use to support the core idea? Students conclude their briefs with the parts of the exhibit, along with potential titles for the exhibit. We meet as a class to share their ideas. At this point, you can spend many days debating core ideas and titles (as we have), or you can use worksheets to come up with some common denominators.

Students start with an individual worksheet, then complete a group worksheet, and then we have a class whiteboard session. As a result, instead of twenty core ideas, we end up with a more manageable number for discussion. Moreover, the second item of the worksheet prompts students to identify primary and secondary topics, and this opens the way to incorporate multiple ideas within the exhibit and find places to compromise. The five worksheet guidelines include:

- 1) List a central core idea for the exhibit (or more than one idea if there is no consensus).
- 2) Develop a series of primary and secondary topics (or subthemes) related to the core idea.
- 3) Determine what thematic structure will organize the exhibit (chronological, topical, etc.).
- 4) Discuss imagery or artifacts that would be most effective for your core idea(s).
- 5) Choose a title for your exhibit and choose a title for your group.

With “A Plantation and Its People,” proposals for core ideas ran the gamut from how the Cherokees changed over time to focusing on the individuals or places that marked the plantation. In the end, the students settled on the following core idea: “The Diamond Hill Plantation was a melting pot of early American people in the nineteenth century.” This core idea allowed each group to develop their original main themes as subthemes.²⁸

Crafting a Storyboard for a Historical Exhibit

Once the class has collected materials, and decided core ideas and subthemes, students can then turn their attention to how they are going to tell their story—what specific assets—they will use. Museum specialists refer to this step as **storyboarding**, and there are as many ways to storyboard as there are curators. Charting, drawing, and outlining can all be part of the process, but unlike a film, museum storyboards do not have to be visual. Above all, a museum storyboard plots out an exhibit by connecting different items to the core idea and explaining why each asset is being included in the exhibit. The storyboard also locates potential items in the physical space of the museum. For “A Plantation and Its People,” I followed Lord and Lord’s technique. Students listed each asset on a chart with its exact description, relation to the core idea, and placement in the exhibit. The next year, students had a diagram of their wall spaces and columns and they sketched their assets and core ideas on these templates. For both classes, students had great ideas, but plans are not exhibits. It would be weeks of collecting, measuring, writing, editing, printing, enlarging, cutting, spraying, mounting, and so much more. One thing that dogged us—in and out of the museum—was the last-minute frenzy to be finished on time. No matter how careful or organized, something always needed last-minute attention.

Additional Elements for a Historical Exhibit

To realize an exhibit, every museum curator knows that you need three things: **time**, **money**, and **people**. You most likely will never have enough of each, but you can make up deficits in one area by relief in another. On a strict semester schedule, our classes never had a lot of time. As for money, a few of our exhibits had a small



Figure 5: Two student-curated books of posters for the “Game Changer: The Evolution of Nineteenth-Century Sports” exhibit (Courtesy of Carla Gerona).

budget to cover some of the printing and mounting costs. If you have no support at all, you could add a fundraising component, request a studio or lab fee, or do a free electronic exhibit. With little time or money, that leaves people. Our class enrollments usually ranged between fifteen and twenty students, providing sufficient brainpower and enthusiasm to get the job done. As you decide on student numbers, consider student commitment. Are most students taking the class as a requirement? What other obligations do students have? While a small class might work in some situations, I have found that more hands on deck works best at Georgia Tech.

After four successful classes and exhibits in and out of the museum, the course was still experiencing two perennial problems: group issues and time crunches. There had to be another way, where everyone participated equally and the students created a professional-looking history exhibit on time. I knew that creating templates might be one answer, but I worried that doing this might limit student creativity. A workshop during my fourth class, “Game

Changer,” caused me to reconsider. That year, Georgia Tech hired local artist Ashley Schick to work with our media librarian, Alison Valk; any professor could request a visiting workshop. I jumped at this chance. In previous classes, one group (and often one artistic student within the group) had created the poster exhibit. In this case, each student completed a prototype, as the class learned about color wheels, compositional balance, and design software. Students posted work in progress on the wall for class critiques. Choosing our final poster was a tough call that ended in a tie vote, and Schick suggested that we mount the runner-up along with the rest in several oversized books for the exhibit (**Figure 5**). Three days of formal poster design was great—though it did not help scheduling, at least for that class. The workshop did inspire me to redesign the course so that each student would participate in every step of curation, which ultimately helped to address time problems and improved group work.

IV. The “Portfolio-to-Panel” Step-by-Step Approach for Historians and Students

I first tried the new Portfolio-to-Panel approach for “A Walk in the Park,” and the model worked so well that I barely changed it in 2017 when the students curated “Ideas and Edifices: Atlanta’s Explosive Sixties.” Both exhibits drew on Atlanta resources, and I designed sequential assignments that walked each student through the entire curatorial process—from research to show—dividing the class into three units: (1) research (**portfolio**), (2) individual curation (**panel**), and (3) group curation (**group work**). Individual 20” x 30” panels mounted on foam core provided the bulk of the exhibit—as though each student had their own museum wall. In addition to providing a more comprehensive experience, the overall shift to individual curation allowed me to formulate a different grading structure that would more accurately reflect what each student contributed to the exhibit. Each unit was worth 33% of their grade. To be sure, this more controlled model was less whimsical—and I could think of a few students who would have preferred the more ad hoc approach. However, most students welcomed the increased accountability that recognized their individual efforts and the more organized procedures. Numerical course evaluations for the course, always positive, jumped about 20%.

Portfolio Research

The procedure for producing a portfolio begins with **background readings** (this can take various forms depending on your subject). Before using the portfolio method, I had assigned readings throughout the semester. With the portfolio method, I front-loaded readings so that students could quickly move on to their individual research readings. For “A Walk in the Park,” students read James W. Loewen’s introduction from *Lies Across America: What Our Historic Sites Get Wrong*, Kevin M. Kruse’s “The Politics of Race and Public Space: Desegregation, Privatization, and the Tax Revolt in Atlanta,” and several other articles that students could select from a menu.²⁹ For “Ideas and Edifices,” students read Loewen’s introduction along with two chapters about the 1960s from Eric Foner’s *Give Me Liberty!*³⁰ Early on, I introduce the key concepts described above (core idea, visual base, interpretive labels, and iconic quote) and students start looking for assets. As students read, they complete worksheets to include in their portfolios, in which they identify points and assets that will help them create a strong exhibit.

Within the first month, I also introduce students to museums over time and the **concept of museums as institutions**. Sometimes I use my own lectures, and sometimes I have experts come in. We also have a site visit, usually at the Williams Paper Museum, with an accompanying worksheet that asks students to identify the four elements (core idea, visual base, interpretive labels, and iconic quote). The education coordinator at the museum tells us about the museum’s mission and talks about the different roles in the museum. This first month is also the time for historical background presentations. For “A Walk in the Park,” we had talks on the Civil War, the Progressive Era, and the Civil Rights Era, as these were most relevant to park growth and use. For “Ideas and Edifices,” I gave several presentations about the 1960s. This is a lot of material to digest, and in lieu of tests, I ask students to include class notes in their portfolios.

As we work through this introductory matter, students also begin to think about **forming groups**. For “A Walk in the Park,” I selected provisional topics based on my preliminary investigations. The students then chose the categories that were most interesting to them. I made it clear that the topics I provided were just starting points and that further inquiries might take them in different directions. After

doing more research, they combined several of my initial categories and formed four final groups. The student titles (and the core ideas added later) included:

- “Piedmont Park” (largest park in Atlanta; grew with New South and urban development)
- “Residential Parks” (early subdivisions created green spaces following Olmsted models)
- “Battles” (Civil War and Civil Rights sites marked the parks)
- “Plan B” (some parks never came to be or experienced unusual difficulties)

As students refined their topics, they also decided to concentrate on one park per person, or one aspect of the park in the case of the Piedmont group.

For “Ideas and Edifices,” instead of providing categories, I wanted to let the students decide as much as possible. After introductory readings and presentations, the students came up with the following groups and, later, core ideas:

- Political Movements: Progress is Never Without Conflict
- Arts and Leisure: Culture finds New Modes of Expression
- Society: Economic Growth’s Unintended Consequences
- Architecture: Downtown Development of a Model City

The greatest practical challenge in both classes was making sure that everyone was working on something different. Despite our best efforts, within groups and across groups, individuals gravitated towards similar topics such as Frederick Law Olmsted or the Civil Rights Movement. I helped students divide these popular topics into subtopics.

To encourage deep research, I provide a series of **stepped assignments**, each of which also goes into the portfolio. Students begin each assignment in class or at our computer lab, which enables me to uncover problems early. They then complete each assignment outside of class. To get Wikipedia out of the way (and because the Internet has great material), their first portfolio research assignment is an *Initial Web Research* worksheet. For “A Walk in the Park,” their task was to “develop a general understanding of your topics, but also to start figuring out more refined topical areas

for each person to pursue—so that everyone in the group is looking at something different.” With my help, each student compiles a list of keywords and they conduct searches based on their terms. They describe their five best websites, selecting five pictures and three iconic quotes. We go over these together in class and I ask students to start thinking about selections. What are the good stories? What are the best pictures? Why did they choose these?

In previous years—despite course requirements—some students failed to go beyond initial web research. Using the portfolio method, I can carefully map out the rest of their research instructions so that everyone participates. With the help of our museum liaison, students did a *Secondary Source Research* assignment in which they searched for relevant books and articles. Ideally, each student would identify and obtain at least one book and three articles on their topic. Similar to the previous assignment, I asked students to describe their readings by reviewing central arguments, listing interesting stories, choosing five visuals, and selecting three quotes. For “A Walk in the Park,” students encountered various problems. Some found very specific information, while others had to widen their lens. I emphasized that their research did not have to deal with a particular park, but rather could add general context. I encouraged students to be flexible and respond to interesting and unexpected findings. With this particular topic, I also found myself having to remind the students that we were *curating a historical exhibit*; their material was therefore to be at least twenty-five years old.

This historical outlook became even more central for their next portfolio assignment, *Archival Primary Source Research*. This time, students were to search for their actual parks and topics during different time periods in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* and other online databases that could be accessed in our computer lab. Again, students included visual bases, interpretative labels, and iconic quotes. I also required students to attach copies of their articles, which proved enormously useful later on. Some student interpretations did not accurately reflect the history, and having the articles made it possible for me to help students revise their labels. Other panels lacked strong visuals. In those cases, a well-chosen newspaper headline or an old picture could resolve such problems. The year the students curated “A Walk in the Park,” they also had the option to dig deeper into primary sources for extra credit. Some

looked at letters in books, and a few enterprising students visited local archives at Emory University and the Atlanta History Center.

The extra-credit research led to some of the best material in that exhibit, and I decided to feature archival research the following year. For “Ideas and Edifices,” we began our archival journey at the Georgia Tech Archives. Archivists introduced the students to working in special collections and showed them how to use the scanner apps on their phones. They sifted through school newspapers, records, yearbooks, and other files, looking for the usual assets. Students also visited an additional local archive of their choice from a list that I provided. I had contacted all the archivists beforehand, and they welcomed our students, who uncovered many visual and textual gems. However, some archives did not allow cameras. Therefore, in the future, I will steer students towards those repositories that allow students to pull out their cell phones to do research.

The second to last component of their portfolio is the *Original Photography* assignment—as my students had done for the Vann exhibit. Students do not have enough time or money to obtain permission for copyrighted materials, but it is cheap and easy to take pictures. For “A Walk in the Park,” each student photographed their park and submitted five samples. For “Ideas and Edifices,” I asked students to submit at least ten pictures of two buildings designed during the 1960s, preferably places related to their research; they listed their building on the class website to avoid repetition. However, Atlanta likes to build and rebuild; in fact, city authorities blew up the 1960s-era State Archives Building just a few days into our class. Therefore, as an alternative, students could take a picture of a building that had some other interesting connection to the 1960s. I urged students to experiment with compositions—look up, look down, do close-ups, use wide angles, play with lights and shadows, etc. Students took amazing pictures of sky walkways, circular buildings, decorative blocks, glass walls, and the massive concrete constructions from the 1960s that embody the “brutalist” style that continues to dominate downtown Atlanta. Students also photographed buildings such as the Fox Theatre, where you can still see the separate “Negro Box Office” and “Negro Stairs” used during the segregation era. Students find that they do not have to be professional photographers to take good pictures, and this adds another creative element to the course. The students also share

pictures with each other and as they move through the next stages of this curatorial process.

As we proceed through the different portfolio items, students upload select material to our website for class review. We rarely finish these critiques, but I make sure everyone gets at least one turn. Students also meet to evaluate their work in groups. Because research begets more research, I allow students to build on their assignments until the day they turn in their portfolio. No later than midterms, students compile all the material into a final portfolio and they cap off their findings with an **exhibit brief**, as described above. I grade this final portfolio using a simple rubric listing all assignments, worksheets, and notes. Students normally stop doing research at this point, as they have collected more than enough assets for their show. As previously, they work on core ideas and titles as groups, followed by a full class meeting where they discuss, combine, seek consensus, and (when that consensus is lacking) vote. With their confirmed core ideas, they can start storyboarding, which is done while planning panels.

Storyboarding and Designing Panels

The panel method guides students as they decide how to tell a story to support their core idea—what to keep, and what to cut. Like the portfolio, students generally do this assignment individually. Creating panels independently provides each student with a chance to develop visual competencies—to play with pictures, designs, and graphics. Everyone has to think about the relationships of pictures and texts, even if this is not their strong suit. To get the best results, I provide students with some basic guidelines, emphasizing the main theme of “less is more.” The guidelines also contain a list of common errors such as heavy pixilation, lack of focus, too-small type, and so forth. I list these guidelines on worksheets that they use to review their work as we go. This system results in sharper panels as students help each other to finalize their presentations.

To begin their panels, students **select assets and start to storyboard** (always with their core idea in mind) using the following prompts:

- Choose a title (and optional subtitle)
- Create two or three interpretive labels (at least one contextual and one anecdotal, at about 100 to 200 words for each)

- Identify at least one original photograph (to feature on the panel)
- Identify three other visuals (particularly from newspaper and primary source research)
- Create a timeline with five important dates

Students should explain what work each item is doing—how it is advancing the class, group, or panel core idea. How will it tell their story?

The next step is to **design panels**, which eventually leads to the creation of a class template—a set of rules about font, color, and design that everyone can live by. I strongly suggest using a PowerPoint template and requiring PowerPoint slides for panel submissions. PowerPoint offers versatile graphic choices and the slides are easy to edit. I start by creating a bare-bones template in the correct size, with a list of required elements and a few sizing guidelines. For “A Walk in the Park,” each group began with a practice panel before turning to their individual submissions. Every group developed a mock panel about the *Holmes v. Atlanta* case after visiting their sister exhibit. One group had designed a colorful collage-like panel, while the other two had a geometric layout. The class debated the merit of both approaches and eventually decided on the more orderly format. By the end of that class, students had determined most of their rules for their individual panels, and, as a bonus, they had constructed a panel about the landmark case to include in their exhibit (**Figure 6**).

For “Ideas and Edifices,” instead of group submissions, individuals brought in their rough drafts for **class critique to develop class rules**. In both cases, time ran short, and we made many decisions with up and down votes. When irreconcilable differences emerged, I suggested creating a menu of options. This is why some panels have borders, drawings, and timelines, while others do not. Some students—sometimes the best ones—will want to break the rules. Being flexible solves most disagreements, while also maintaining some uniformity for the exhibit.

Once rules are set, it is imperative to post them, including the color formulas, so everyone can follow along as they finish their final drafts. Students adjust their panels accordingly, and bring in their actual-size prints for a final class review. Again, students fill out worksheets to evaluate each other. The worksheet asks students

Shooting for Equality:

Holmes v. Atlanta and the Fight to Desegregate Golf



In 1951, Alfred "Tup", Oliver, and Hamilton H. Holmes and Charles Bell were denied access to Bobby Jones Golf course as the course was reserved for whites only. To claim their right as lawful tax-paying citizens to use public spaces, the men took legal action. A district court ruling allowed them to play on Mondays and Tuesdays, but the men refused to settle and took their case to the United States Supreme Court. Thurgood Marshall, who would later become the first African American Supreme Court Justice, represented the plaintiffs.

On November 7th, 1955, The US Supreme Court issued a ruling that called for racial desegregation of all of Atlanta's public golf courses. On December 24th, the Holmes brothers and family friend Charles Bell teed up at North Fulton Golf Course to play the first ever desegregated game in Atlanta's golf history. Although the men had been scheduled to play at Bobby Jones Golf Course, they changed locations in response to threats.

In 1954, the famous *Brown v. Board* Supreme Court case opened the door to integrate other public facilities beyond public schools. *Holmes v. Atlanta* confirmed the unconstitutionality of "separate but equal" recreational spaces, and set a precedent for other Civil Rights cases across the south.

"If you give me one good satisfactory reason why I can't play on the city owned golf courses, I'll accept it. If not, we play."
 - Alfred F. "Tup" Holmes



The Holmes Legacy
 The desegregation of golf was only one of the outstanding contributions that the Holmes family made to the Civil Rights Movement. In 1964, Hamilton E. Holmes, son of "Tup" Holmes, desegregated the University of Georgia along with Charlayne Hunter-Gault (right).



Ten years later, Tup Holmes' other son, Michael Holmes, was the first African American to receive an MBA from Stanford University's Graduate School of Business.



"Tup" Holmes, Oliver Holmes, and Charlie Bell playing at North Fulton Golf Course

Figure 6: Final *Holmes v. Atlanta* panel for the "A Walk in the Park" student exhibit, with titles, visuals, interpretations, and iconic quote.

to proofread and to look for unclear images, dark graphics, sloppy layouts, and more. After class critique, I also do an **individual review** with each student. Once approved, students can print up their final draft on 20" x 30" mounted foam core, all using the same paper (matte or glossy) at our student print shop.

As with the portfolio, I use a rubric to grade the final panels. The rubric has three sections—timing, texts, and visuals—with twenty total items. The timing section provides points for meeting deadlines. The text section evaluates students' connection to core idea, the research used, effectiveness of title, clarity of language, interest of material, inclusion of iconic quote, focus of content, and accuracy of information. The visuals section evaluates connection to core idea, use of original photographs, and documentation of research pictures, as well as image quality, color, composition, resolution, and graphics. The visual section also has a line item called "followed class rules."

Group Work to Build the Exhibit

You could stop your exhibit at this point—a series of themed panels—but to finish the curatorial process, I conclude with group work. This catch-all term includes class attendance and participation throughout, but it is mainly an evaluation of student work as they **finalize and present the exhibits**. To bring the exhibit to completion, the students create several extra panels: titles, introductions, group introductions, acknowledgments, and a poster for the exhibit. Group introductions include a team name, a timeline, and a brief interpretation to highlight their core idea. After all submissions are in, we discuss and choose one style for all of the groups. By this stage, the colors and design elements are set, so there is little difficulty in adjusting to conform. I try to have each group do all of the remaining tasks during class, but if time runs short, they divide the work—and, at this point, group troubles can resurface. For example, in “A Walk in the Park,” the group in charge of creating the exhibit title used a picture they copied and pasted from the Internet of a couple walking in the park. It was a great idea, but it was not original. I urged the students to rethink the design or take their own picture. After a little grumbling, one student finally agreed to shoot some original pictures during his morning jog. This group did not realize how easy they had it!

The last part of group work involves mounting the exhibit, distributing flyers, posting electronic content, creating webpages, and planning the opening. One group even did a radio interview. Students sign up for and earn hours for this part of the exhibit, which is easy and inexpensive if you use the Portfolio-to-Panel method. Instead of having walls, columns, and cases—some with pictures, others with artifacts—students simply hang their foam board panels. Easy builds allow time to concentrate on opening events. For “A Walk in the Park,” the students created a series of indoor games. For “Ideas and Edifices,” students played different kinds of music from the 1960s. In both cases, we invited professors, parents, relatives, and friends. In addition, I offered my other classes extra credit to join us for some free food. The visiting students filled out a questionnaire—what museum professionals call “back-end evaluation.” To see how successfully my students fulfilled their goals, the survey asks students to describe the main ideas, identify favorites, and suggest changes. They also discuss the process with

one of the curators. Visitors sign our guestbook, and the engagement level is always high during exhibit openings—and beyond.

To be sure, the Portfolio-to-Panel exhibit looks different from an exhibit based on museum artifacts, or from one created from scratch for a gallery space. Yet the printed panels feature all the elements typical of a history exhibit: primarily, texts and visuals. Moreover, this is very similar to the kind of curation students might have to do in other settings—for example, creating media pages in their future jobs. In general, the shift to individual work in the Portfolio-to-Panel approach motivated students to do deep historical research and create excellent designs. Because the students had accumulated everything they needed before they met to do group projects, they experienced better teamwork, too. The Portfolio-to-Panel method is less stressful for all—with exhibits completed on time.

Conclusion

A student once asked me if I had a favorite class. My answer was that classes are like children—you cannot pick your favorite one. Each one can be great in its own way, even when things are not perfect. So it is with “Introduction to Museum Studies.” I have taught this class in three fundamentally different ways: two classes with a museum, two classes by myself, and two classes using the Portfolio-to-Panel approach. Each variation has provided great opportunities for students to learn about curation in history, curation and history, and just plain-old curation. Different approaches might work best in different situations.

What is next for “Introduction to Museum Studies” at Georgia Tech? At the risk of inviting controversy, I am going to apply the Portfolio-to-Panel approach for a class and exhibit about Stone Mountain, and am looking forward to what my students will do. Of course, I still have a Mississippian Indian and de Soto exhibit waiting on the horizon, a topic I know well.³¹ Doing work related to your field allows you to bring deep knowledge to the exhibit planning process; you will not end up with eighteenth-century railroads. However, if you work outside your research field, you can always turn to other experts to fill in the gaps, and you may end up going in directions that you never imagined. No matter what approach you take, teaching a studio history course unites historians, curators, students, and visitors to bring the past into the present in useful ways.

Notes

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