Pedagogy Forum

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Visualizing Museums
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The Issue
Many survey courses cover a lot of ground with little time available to probe individual topics in depth. A 200 level introductory course that provides an overview of 500 years of museum history with political, social, and cultural implications, for example, offers few opportunities to explore topics in depth.

Why does it matter
The placement of objects in a museum suggests meaning that can be difficult to convey. A painting in all of its complexity can be shown in a slide with its meaning relatively uninhibited, but how do you convey the reasons for its installation in a particular museum, its relationship to the other items with which it shares exhibit space, or the changing nature of its importance over time and other exhibits in which it might be included? As any architectural historian would know, it's difficult to convey in a traditional lecture the complex meaning and structure of a museum building.

Faculty Solution
With the support of a Technology Fellowship grant from the CER, a student fellow and I created a site called "Mapping Museums," using the Interactive Map Tool developed in the CER. The tool allowed me to develop ten case studies that illustrate specific issues associated with the historical development of individual museums. Through a series of pages that included images, floor plans, and objects, each museum's map illustrates the spatial layout of objects, how they are presented in relationship to one another, and the impact of their arrangement on viewers.

For example, in class we discuss the rise of nation states in the 18th century and the impact that had on museum collecting and display. I have the students look at the
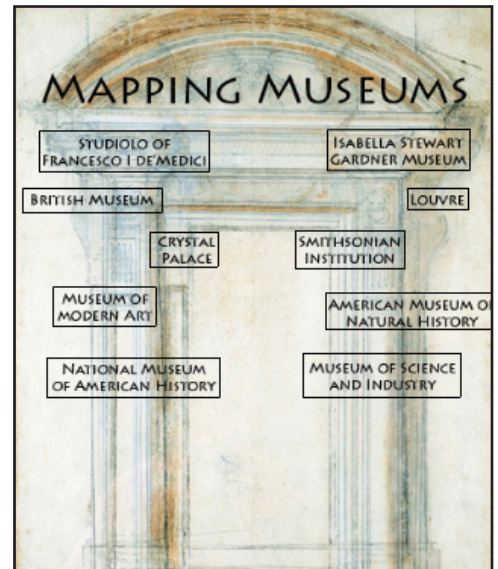
Screenshot of intro page

Louvre as a case study for this historical period. The Map Tool allowed me to bring images together giving spatial context to the Louvre's display of collected objects. This simply can't be done effectively using PowerPoint. Exploring the spatial dimensions of a museum facilitates understanding the relationship of the use of space and how objects are presented and the societal interests of the time.

When students use this 'virtual pop-up book,' as I like to describe the Map Tool, they can see how people would have entered the main entrance of a museum and what they would have first encountered in a given time period. When curators moved those objects in subsequent years, their relocation had significant implications. Students can begin to think about why objects are moved from one period to another and how their relocation reflects the ideas and attitudes of the times.

Results
I give a lot of credence to general course evaluations at the end of the semester. I also create my own evaluation instruments with

Results (cont.)

more specific questions. When the Tech Fellowship project was completed [using the MapTool], the CER helped facilitate both a Map Tool-specific and an overall course assessment survey to gauge the impact of the project on the class. Initially there were no data to compare the assessment to a control group since it was the first time I had taught the course, but the students expressed enthusiasm for the class. Another indication of the Map Tool's usefulness was the number of students (10 out of 25) who opted to create a museum site in the Map Tool for their final project. The feedback was excellent. They said the Map Tool museum creation exercise made them think in new ways; they appreciated the variety it offered for class work. I was especially pleased with how they conceived new questions. Half of these student final projects have been further developed and incorporated into the course site. Having the Map Tool as a resource that students can access outside of class was helpful for students' preparations for tests and class discussions. Students can also explore the museums in more depth on their own outside of class.

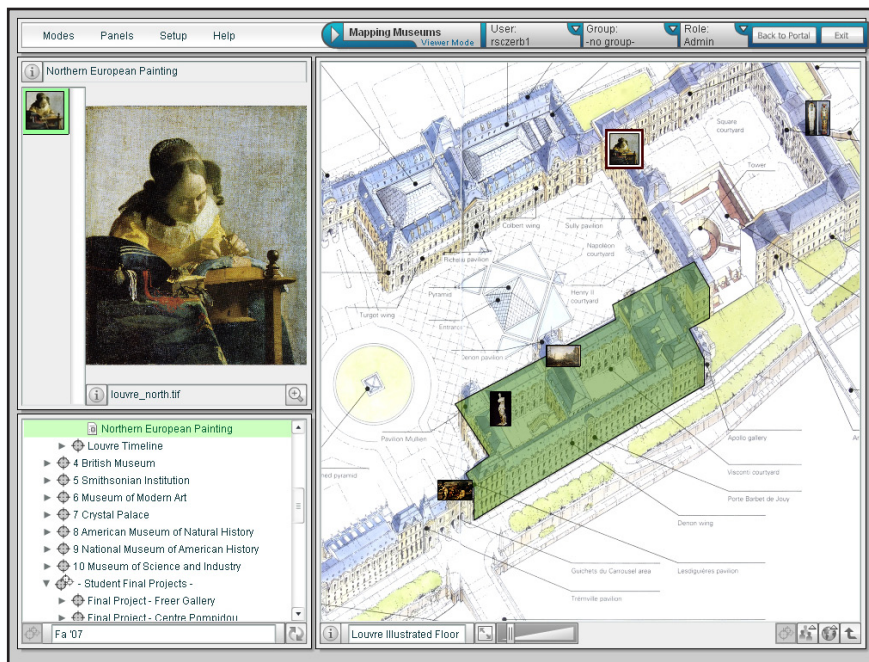**Case study example, The Louvre**

Other Thoughts

Sample student survey comments:

"I really liked using the digital map tool and the professor's utilization of images onscreen as a supplemental tool for the lecture. Offering a "map" project instead of a paper for a final project was a welcome change from other courses."

"The lectures and especially the map tool were really what made this course for me... I really appreciated having the chance to branch out and do a map project rather than just a research paper."

"The mapping option for the final project was a nice change of pace from the traditional paper. For me, it made the research more engaging and interactive, and it was nice to compile information and draw conclusions in a new way."
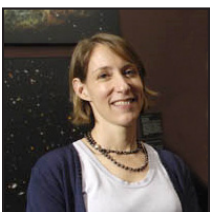
Additional Resources

- Mary Beth Regan (2007), "Museum World Tour, 2007"; Arts & Sciences Magazine, Fall/Winter 2007
  http://www.krieger.jhu.edu/magazine/fw07/t4.html
- The Interactive Map Tool's home page
  http://www.cer.jhu.edu/maptool.html

Author's Background

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I'm teaching a range of courses in the Museums and Society Program, which encompass undergraduate classes from the introductory 200 level up to 400 level undergraduate seminars on focused topics. The courses that I teach are mostly lecture and discussion- based, depending on the size and nature of the project.