



WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Incorporating Museums into Course Design

Nancy Lynne Westfield, Ph.D., *The Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion*

Blog Series: Teaching On The Pulse

June 01, 2023

Tags: course design | museums | curation | partnership

Museums were a significant aspect of my childhood education. Living in Philadelphia, we were a family who regularly visited museums and historic sites. Saturday family activities, summertime daytrips, and adventures when out-of-town relatives visited, would typically involve museum excursions. The spring field trips by George Washington Carver Elementary School, funded in-part by monies raised by the parents' organization, were, joyfully, to the museums. In the 5th and 6th grades, respectively, my parents enrolled me and my brother in Saturday enrichment classes at the Franklin Institute. By high school, we had regularly visited the: Philadelphia Art Museum, Franklin Institute, Please Touch Museum, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Betsy Ross House, Academy of Natural Sciences, Carpenter's Hall, the African American Museum, and several neighborhood museums. All this is to say, museums were an integral part of how I learned as a child.

Then, in college, graduate school, while serving local churches and while on the faculty of a theological school, I only sparingly incorporated museums into my teaching or research. Yes, I planned the occasional field trip, but museums were not vital to my teaching. Museums were not part of my pedagogical repertoire.

With delight! - museums have returned to my awareness.

I have had the good fortune to visit the National Museum of African American History and

Culture, Washington, DC, twice within the past six weeks. These two visits have given me a renewed appreciation for museums and the ways they can and do nurture our curiosity. While visiting the museum, I experienced the power of exhibits to interpret the stories of people.

On both visits, we were hosted by Eric Lewis Williams, Ph.D., Curator of Religion at Smithsonian National Museum of African American History & Culture. Dr. Williams curated the exhibit, "Spirit in the Dark: Religion in Black Music, Activism, and Popular Culture." The exhibit brilliantly and provocatively suggests the myriad of ways in which religion is a part of the cultural fabric of African American experience.

As Dr. Williams designed, the viewer's imagination is captured through photographs, objects, and depictions which makes the exhibit a marvel. With Dr. Williams' help, I experienced a kind of magic and majesty in the stories told by the artifacts. I viewed, and sometimes handled, objects, relics, remnants, and fragments. Being able to discuss the exhibit, and its design, with the curator - was riveting. The exhibit prompted new perspectives for even the most familiar cultural story.

It was fun. It was intriguing. I was wowed and was led to epiphanies!

How, rather than planning courses, might we design learning experiences for our adult learners?

Since returning to my desk, I have continued to dialogue with Dr. Williams. I am curious about the ways religion and theological classrooms might be strengthened through partnering with museum educators, curators, and administrators.

I want to know more about curating, archiving, conservation, and material culture so I can improve my own teaching. I want to better understand collecting, and the ways storytelling through artifacts might be added to adult classrooms. Dr. Williams and I are thinking together about ways the Wabash Center might engage these kinds of questions:

- What would it mean for the Wabash Center to support faculties to explore ways of incorporating museums into their undergraduate and graduate level curriculum?
- What could be the role of museums in theological education for the preparation of congregational leadership; for teaching religion in the public; for more interactive educational experiences?
- In what ways could religion scholars assist museums in their interpretation and presentation of exhibits?
- What does it mean that, increasingly, critical interpretation of religion and theology is encountered by the public in museums?
- What if the work of critical interpretation employed in our classrooms is enhanced and enriched through the storytelling approaches of museums?
- In what ways can we learn to incorporate archiving, curating, conserving and exhibiting into our course design?
- What can be learned from museum pedagogies to strengthen religious and theological

education?

Given the prospects of enhancing teaching through museum education practices and visits, and since many professors spend their summers involved in course planning, I encourage you to consider spending part of your summer in museums and historic sites to:

- get to know museum educators
- get acquainted with museum curators and administrators
- enquire about exhibits scheduled for display in the fall and spring semesters
- plan for certain artifacts to be brought to your classroom during the semester
- enroll in a workshop offered by the museum
- learn the ways museums educate the public on your scholarly interests
- take notice of the many ways that museums make use of digital interaction in order to tell stories
- rethink and redesign an upcoming course
- imagine learning activities, student assignments, and excursions that invite students to become curators, archivists, and create exhibits

Find the museums on your campus, in your town or city – and have fun!

<https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2023/06/incorporating-museums-into-course-design/>