

Connecting Students and Museums: A New Kind of Distance Learning

By Karin Kierstead and Deborah Scott



Far left: Lynch-Dolan Bakery
Photograph. Photo: Cape Breton
Centre for Heritage & Science
Left: Ship Model. Photo: Queens
County Museum

Project Background: Where did the idea of the partnership come from?

The Museum Management and Curatorship program at Fleming College, and its sister program in Cultural Heritage Conservation and Management, are recognized for their emphasis on applied learning. This approach emphasizes the relevance of what is being learned in the 'real world' outside the classroom. It often involves students and faculty in community partnerships which provide the out-of-school context needed to link theory and practice.

Applied projects also play a key role in preparing students for the realities and complexities that they will encounter in the field. As the use of 'new technology' becomes more prevalent in museums, faculty have explored applied learning opportunities that will help students develop the knowledge and skills they will require. With respect to collections management, this has included digitizing collections so that information can be

easily accessed and used for a variety of purposes both in-house and online.

Research indicates that there is much work to be done in cultural institutions generally to improve the accuracy, consistency and depth of collections information. Fleming students are fortunate to be able to work with the collections database at the Peterborough Museum & Archives, our main learning partner. Still, given the current focus on digitization and online access, we recognized the desirability of providing students with additional experience in this area.

Community museums in Nova Scotia adopted a cooperative model for database work in 2002. Over the years as the initiative grew, it developed into a full Advisory Service managed by the Association of Nova Scotia Museums (ANSM). In 2011, ANSM embarked on a database renewal project, migrating more than 50 of its Advisory Service member museums to the web-based, open-source CollectiveAccess collections management system. The capabilities

of the new system re-energized ANSM and participating museums, and in 2012 the public website NovaMuse.ca was launched, providing access to Nova Scotia collections like never before. The hard work paid off and ANSM was rewarded with a CMA Award of Outstanding Achievement in 2013.

ANSM's Advisory Service is focused on supporting museums in their work by building capacity. To this end, resources and database tools are developed that will guide museum workers in their collections management work, and special projects are sought out that will increase the on-site knowledge level. Recognizing that museum workers wear many hats and often have difficulty finding time to review and enhance database records, developing a partnership with Fleming College was an obvious win-win scenario.

The project idea was sparked during a casual conversation about museums being over-stretched and students needing real-world experience. With a new web-based collections management

system in place, geography no longer mattered. Museums could be "accessed" regardless of their location or hours of operation. Recognizing that the collection records of the 51 museums participating in NovaMuse are a work-in-progress, this got us thinking.

Could CollectiveAccess and NovaMuse allow for Fleming students to assist Nova Scotia community museums with improving the quality of data for selected artefacts in their collections? The answer, we agreed, was a resounding yes!

Project Description: How does the partnership work?

The premise was simple; what would happen if you walked into a new job at a museum but there was no one around to provide information about the collection? What if the collections database was your only source of information? What could be done to improve the quality of the database records?

This applied project, undertaken for the first time in 2012, begins by identifying which ANSM member museums are interested in participating. ANSM ensures that its support services are equally distributed across the province. Service delivery is tracked in the four heritage regions, and so participation in the project is spread between these

regions, determining participants by reviewing which museums are next in line for special project support. Each museum is provided with an outline of the project methodology and asked if they would be willing to provide the students with limited access to their database. When permission is granted, the museum advisor selects database records for inclusion and provides both Fleming College and the museum staff and volunteers with the list. Records are selected that have associated digital images and will provide the students with a variety of object types to review.

Each of the Fleming students is assigned 10 records and a student-level user account so that they can access the database of their 'adopted' museum.

The applied project itself consists of three parts. First, the students review and clean the data in their 10 assigned records, ensuring that the fields are being used correctly, and moving information to the correct field if necessary. Related tasks include:

- ▲ ensuring Nomenclature 3.0 is followed,
- ▲ converting any imperial measurements to metric,
- ▲ applying a date or date range to the begin and end date fields, if possible,
- ▲ providing a georeference for place of origin and/or use, if known, and
- ▲ reviewing information in the other fields and correcting obvious errors or omissions.

Next, students undertake research on two of the 10 objects they have been assigned, choosing objects that have research potential and spark their interest. Once this research has been completed, the appropriate fields on the object's record are enriched to the fullest extent possible.

Finally, the students prepare a report for 'their' museum. This includes a description of changes made to its records and practical suggestions for how the museum can improve its cataloguing and photography practices based on trends observed within their database. The report also contains a summary of relevant historical information and sources for each of the two objects researched, along with a list of the database fields that were enriched, and the fields that still require enriching by the museum. If no related information was found, a short description of the research process is provided.

A formal letter thanking the museum for the opportunity to work with their collections records accompanies the report.

To assist students and support their success, the ANSM museum advisor introduces the project during a guest lecture via Skype. Students are provided with guidelines for entering data in each field and tips on dating artefacts. A Facebook group is created to serve as a Q&A forum for the duration of the project, providing an opportunity for group discussion and learning. Since NovaMuse harvests database updates on a daily basis, this provides the students with a timely support network where they can garner assistance from the museum advisor and from each other.

Oil can.
Photo: Scott Manor House





Map of Annapolis Royal. Photo: Annapolis Heritage Society

Project Benefits: What have the partners gained from their experience?

Fleming College and its Students

Partnering with the ANSM and its member museums has enabled us to provide nearly 100 Fleming students with valuable learning opportunities that would not have been available otherwise.

These include using new technologies such as open-source databases and georeferencing, accessing a wide range of collections records, and working collaboratively to enhance them by applying what students have learned.

Importantly, the knowledge and skills students develop through these activities are directly transferable to the collections information systems of museums and galleries elsewhere.

The partnership has also helped students make stronger connections between theory and practice, better prepare for their upcoming internships, develop content for their professional portfolios, communicate clearly and effectively in writing, and perhaps give more serious thought to a collections management career.

When surveyed, students were extremely positive about the value of this applied learning experience. Some of the benefits they identified include:

- being exposed to the rich range of objects in community museum collections,
- learning about the wide variation in type, depth and quality of information that exists in collection databases,
- acquiring additional practical experience in cataloguing and thinking critically about the proper use of data entry standards and procedures,
- gaining experience with a different database,
- observing how museums can work together to make their collections records consistent and accessible online, and
- feeling as if they were contributing something of value to their 'adopted' museum.

In the students' own words:

"It was exciting to be part of a fairly revolutionary concept and to be able to assist small museums a few provinces away!"

"This was a great assignment because it gave me practical experience not only in collections management, but in collaboration and working with museums."

ANSM and its Member Museums

To date, 31 ANSM member museums have had almost 1000 records cleaned. Nearly 200 objects associated with these records have been researched and new information added to the corresponding databases. Being able to provide this support to our members through the Fleming partnership is invaluable.

The project also speaks to the cooperative roots of the Advisory Service. Not every museum can participate each year, but there is an understanding that what benefits one will benefit the collective whole, and gradually each museum will have its turn.

Participating museums have not just been open to the project, but enthusiastic about it. Receiving some extra assistance has been a boost to morale, the reports have helped to frame and focus database work for summer staff, and the museums enjoyed the opportunity to give back to the museum field by opening their databases to emerging professionals.

In the museums' own words:

"Community museums are always facing shortages of volunteers. The opportunity to have collections work carried out by students trained in proper methodology is a win-win situation for both the institution and the next "gen" of museum workers."

"One of the nice things about technology is that it doesn't rely on a physical presence, or space to accommodate a student. I feel that working cooperatively between provinces is a healthy approach. Our NovaMuse Program is nationally recognized – it seems logical that it should be helping to educate students from across the country."

"When I started working in the local museum as a student I had more energy and enthusiasm than I have after decades in the field. While I have come to accept that there is never enough time, staff, money, support to have the "perfect museum" I have

also realized that a smart institution makes use of a good opportunity when one is presented – this was a good opportunity. If this site can reciprocate by providing an educational opportunity then we would be remiss not to."

Challenges & Insights: What hurdles have we encountered and what have we learned?

Perspective of Fleming College & Its Students:

Not surprisingly, the greatest challenges encountered when cleaning and enriching the collection records of Nova Scotia community museums relate to not having physical access to the objects themselves, and/or their original documentation.

In some cases, students were limited in their efforts to glean as much information as possible from the database by a lack of information about the artefacts, and/or the poor quality of the photographs.

Students were also concerned about making mistakes or errors since the collections records were 'live'. Additionally, some felt uncomfortable making suggestions for improving cataloguing and photography practices since they did not want to step on anyone's toes!



Home Page. Photo: NovaMuse.ca

From the perspective of faculty, the main challenge involved the time required to review the records assigned to each student, given the need for close and careful attention to detail. This included following up with them to make sure that outstanding corrections and changes were made. Faculty also recognized that instructions for some parts of the project could have been clearer.

Perspective of the ANSM & Its Member Museums

The biggest challenge for the museums was to have targeted records "off-limits" for the duration of the assignment. Since the students were marked on their work, any other editing could affect their grade. There have also been a couple issues of research veering off in a different direction than the museum would have liked, but since they review the records researched by the students, the museum can roll back or adjust the record as they see fit.

From ANSM's perspective, the biggest challenge was the time required to manage the project. The majority of time was spent in its preparation and finalization. A significant amount of time was required at the beginning to review it with potential participants and then select records for inclusion. When the project ended and students submitted their reports, these needed to be reviewed and then circulated to the appropriate museums. Monitoring the Facebook group was also a bit of work, although as the students became more comfortable with the database they often stepped in to assist each other rather than simply waiting for input from the museum advisor.

Currently the ANSM and Fleming faculty are working to address areas that would benefit from improvement.

When the NovaMuse project is launched with this year's students, they will be provided with more detailed guidelines for recording data in each field, clearer and more streamlined instructions, and exemplary examples of previous students' work.

Use of a project Facebook page as a communication tool will continue since being able to share questions and answers in a timely manner is very helpful.

Concluding Thoughts

All parties involved in reviewing the effectiveness of this applied learning partnership agree that the pros outweigh the cons!

The project highlights the need for consistent and good quality collections information, and provides students with an opportunity to apply best practices learned in the classroom so that the 'real life' records of community museums are improved.

It also demonstrates how museums facing the similar challenges with respect to creating and maintaining their collection databases can work together using innovative approaches and technology to move forward in ways that benefit them individually and collectively.

Ultimately, as expressed through the words of one student, the project showed "...what a great resource an online collection can be, especially when it can connect people across the country and allows for more collaboration with students, researchers and other museums." M

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