

This item was submitted to [Loughborough's Research Repository](#) by the author.
Items in Figshare are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved, unless otherwise indicated.

Towards sensibilities of caring with and for museum objects in a university context

PLEASE CITE THE PUBLISHED VERSION

<https://doi.org/10.1080/10598650.2022.2147351>

PUBLISHER

Informa UK

VERSION

VoR (Version of Record)

PUBLISHER STATEMENT

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

LICENCE

CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

REPOSITORY RECORD

Baeza Ruiz, Ana. 2023. "Towards Sensibilities of Caring with and for Museum Objects in a University Context". Loughborough University. <https://hdl.handle.net/2134/21923079.v1>.



Towards Sensibilities of Caring with and for Museum Objects in a University Context

Ana Baeza Ruiz

To cite this article: Ana Baeza Ruiz (2022) Towards Sensibilities of Caring with and for Museum Objects in a University Context, Journal of Museum Education, 47:4, 486-500, DOI: [10.1080/10598650.2022.2147351](https://doi.org/10.1080/10598650.2022.2147351)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10598650.2022.2147351>



© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 05 Jan 2023.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 144



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Towards Sensibilities of Caring with and for Museum Objects in a University Context

Ana Baeza Ruiz

ABSTRACT

Within the prevalent logic of the neoliberal university, teaching and learning are subject to academic audits, performance indicators and quality assurance measures. These impact on the relationships between educators and students, placing an emphasis on self- over collective interests, aspirational mobility, and a culture of ‘speed’ and productivity that leaves little time for reflection. The effects of this are perhaps even more acutely felt in former polytechnic (post-92) universities, where the focus lies on employability, the creative industries, and vocational training. In this context, what does it entail to bring care into the learning environments? This paper considers the activist potential of embodied pedagogies to generate ways of knowing that confront discourses of neoliberal education. Drawing on object-based pedagogic practice with students in face-to-face sessions at the Museum of Domestic Design and Architecture (Middlesex University), the paper considers how such encounters might generate radical practices of care. How might the museum formulate arguments which challenge institutional expectations to perform in the knowledge-based economy? To what extent might these spaces open possibilities for an alternative “commons” beyond neoliberal logics?

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 31 May 2022
Revised 31 October 2022
Accepted 10 November 2022

KEYWORDS

Object-based learning; care; neoliberalism; university; museum; relational; embodied learning

The university museum as a space of care?

Within the prevalent logic of the neoliberal university, teaching and learning have been increasingly subject to academic audits, performance indicators and quality assurance measures.¹ As several scholars have pointed out, these programmatic changes have had a significant impact on the relationships between teachers and students: overall, the emphasis now is on self (over collective) interests, aspirational mobility, and a culture of “speed” and productivity that leaves little time for reflection.² Although more empirical research is needed, it is arguable that the effects of this trend are felt even more acutely in former polytechnic (post-92) universities, where the focus lies on employability, the creative industries, and vocational training. In this context, what does it entail to bring care into the learning environments? How might we engender new affective vocabularies and spaces for self-reflexive, radical openness and collaborative learning? To what extent might new learning spaces open up possibilities for creating alternative ways of being beyond neoliberal logics?

To address this set of issues, this paper considers the extent to which the practice of “care” in a university museum context might generate dissident orientations within the neoliberal infrastructure of the university. More specifically, I discuss sessions that I coordinated as Curator of Engagement at the Museum of Domestic Design and Architecture (MoDA), in collaboration with staff at Middlesex University, between 2019 and 2021. This research aims to contribute to bridging a significant gap in current discussions about museum activism, which rarely address the learning and training processes of museum and heritage workers. If we are to change how museums and their staff engage with things, people, and histories, it seems imperative to seriously consider the educational spaces in which this learning happens, which is by and large at higher education (HE) institutions. While this article addresses these concerns with reference to MoDA, it also aims to elucidate some of the broader implications of practicing care and embodied learning within object-based teaching approaches. The sessions were based on interdisciplinary work across the areas of Fashion, Sociology, and Fine Arts, but for the purposes of this paper, I will be focusing on one Fashion course. While the sessions were not focused on Museum Studies courses per se, their overarching focus on collections, material culture and its custodianship and meaning-making, and wider heritage debates make them relevant to museum and heritage studies learners.

“Care” has been frequently invoked in discussions around the “reimagining” of the university.³ Across the arenas of higher education and museum practice, the political potency of “care” has increasingly been identified as a means to achieve equality and justice.⁴ A significant strand of this research has lent an emphasis on building affective bonds and forms of care through which “quiet activism” are made possible.⁵ In this connection, the cultural geographer Laura Pottinger has argued for an expanded understanding of activism that includes “modest, quotidian acts of kindness, connection and creativity.”⁶ Whether implicitly or explicitly, these accounts build on a more longstanding literature that has seen acts of care – caring about, being cared for, or caring for oneself – as necessarily political.⁷ Yet in museum and heritage settings, the messy reality of caring practices that inform engagement has for the most part gone unrecognized.⁸ Only recently, Nuala Morse has argued in *The Museum as a Space of Social Care* that caring practices are fundamental to museum engagement because “without care, attempts to broaden access to a wider range of people in museums are likely to fail.”⁹ Morse proposes the idea of the museum as a “space of social care,” whereby care extends beyond the care for objects implicit in the Latin term *curare*, towards a “care for people, care for the community, care for staff, care for the present and the past, and care for the future.”¹⁰ Understood in this way, care “takes on distinct relational, material and affective dimensions” that involve museum objects as much as the creative activities through which people engage with them.¹¹ Morse describes the practice of care in the museum as “providing emotional support through listening, encouragement, compassion, and kindness, and providing practical support by offering opportunities to develop creative skills, confidence and interests, while all the time being sensitive to access and other practical needs.”¹² Instead of a logic of contribution, through which the museum frames participation for its own benefit (e.g. having more relevant displays, attracting more diverse audiences, etc.), Morse posits a logic of care through which participants can become “partners in the practices of care and the practices that make the

museum.”¹³ This shift, Morse further argues, “can help challenge aspects of the invisible power at play in the museum.”¹⁴

In this article, I build on these various understandings of “care” to re-examine the sessions at MoDA and reconsider “not only what students and staff in universities know or can do, but also how [they] are learning to be.”¹⁵ In other words, this is about taking stock of the types of subjecthood that learning can encourage. With this, I aim to expand the initial work by Elizabeth Wood and Sarah A. Cole in outlining a “critical museum education pedagogy.”¹⁶ Their activist curriculum envisions “strategies that museum professionals can use to enhance audience participation,” a commitment to community and the development of empathy for other ways of knowing.¹⁷ Wood and Cole focus this transformative task on curricular redesign, while I argue that an underdeveloped but equally important dimension is the kinds of relationships within the learning space between objects and people, specifically attending to the development of practices of care. The paper begins by setting out the specific context of MoDA within the broader field of the UK HE system. I then outline the pedagogical approaches at MoDA in relation to object-based practice, and I conclude with some considerations around the feasibility of learning through care in interstices of the neoliberal university.

MoDA in context

The Museum of Domestic Design & Architecture (MoDA), is part of Middlesex University.¹⁸ As documented by Zoe Hendon, the bulk of the collection originated from the Silver Studio, a commercial business operating in London during the 1880s-1960s.¹⁹ After its closure, the remaining contents – original designs, wallpapers, textiles, record books, photographs, correspondence, and reference materials – were given to Hornsey College of Art, becoming known as the Silver Studio Collection.²⁰ As Hendon notes, this collection has been an integral part of the history of teaching and learning at Hornsey College of Art (subsequently Middlesex Polytechnic and later Middlesex University).²¹ Thus, the collection has been understood and interpreted both as a teaching resource within Middlesex University, and as a heritage asset – signified by its incorporation into a “museum collection.”²² While the contents of the collection have remained the same over this fifty-year period, “the meanings ascribed to them, and the uses to which they have been put as a learning resource, have continued to evolve.”²³ The present focus at MoDA is on object-focused pedagogic practice that is centered on students’ active engagement and haptic learning.²⁴

As a university museum, MoDA is located on this threshold between the museum and the university, as it shares in the epistemological and practical concerns of former, but arguably is also distinctive in its aims, purpose, and audience vis-à-vis the latter, and is expected to respond to the specificities of the HE environment. On the one hand, MoDA has no broad public programming and no gallery spaces, so engagement with collections mostly occurs firsthand, with students and objects in a designated study room, on campus or in the museum, as I elaborate below. On the other hand, MoDA’s activities are informed by the strategic plans of Middlesex University, which are oriented towards student achievement supported by practice-oriented research, knowledge exchange, and flexible, accessible, practice-led teaching. These strategic priorities fold within so-called “radical creativity” which sees innovation, challenge, and risk all as components of a

transformative education. While this vocabulary borrows from the tradition of critical pedagogies of bell hooks and Freire, the terms are located in industry-based development and sketch out a very different political outlook.²⁵ It should be made clear that Middlesex University is no different to other UK universities in its overall orientation: it is deeply enmeshed within in the prevalent marketized model of HE, whose prime focus is students' future employability.²⁶ Here, critiques of employability discourses include the "customerisation" of student learning and experience; skill acquisition being measured according to projected economic gains or individual benefits; an emphasis on self- (over collective) interests; a displacement of social justice by the discourse of aspirational mobility; and the turning of students into units of profit.²⁷ This socio-cultural shift has borne its effects on university museums, which are dependent on university funding, priorities, and benchmarks. At Middlesex, the pressures to become "employable" after graduation are amplified; many students are first-generation university graduates and juggle study with work. Moreover, as is the case with many other post-92 universities, the emphasis is on the provision of undergraduate and postgraduate degrees that have a vocational or professional focus (e.g. nursing, degrees in creative industries, science-based degrees). Recent scholarship in the USA and Australia reflects similar debates around the effects of employability on higher education.²⁸ In other words, the trend in the UK and other English-speaking contexts foregrounds an expectation from the university and students alike for the provision of a "useful" education that will assist their performance in a knowledge-based economy.

In this setting, what is the place of "care"? In what follows, I consider this question through a case-study based on my teaching practice.

Towards a space of care: developing a *relational* practice of object-based learning

Object-based learning in university museums in the UK and Europe has been traditionally discipline-specific, often associated with the study of anatomy, botany, geology, archaeology.²⁹ At MoDA, staff took a different approach, using objects as the starting point for discussion, based on students' existing knowledge, interests, and learning needs. The methods therefore built on Kolb's theory of experiential learning, which posits that learners proceed from concrete sensory experience to abstract conceptualization.³⁰ In that way, museum staff did not start with the assumption that knowledge was in a particular place, or that it was inherent to a particular object, but rather that it was produced through the interaction involving students, objects and museum staff. It was in this sense co-created and process-oriented, embodied, and dynamic.³¹

One aspect which remains insufficiently examined in this tradition of experiential learning, however, is the *relational* dimension of these encounters. And this, as I will argue, has been central to a practice of care in the classroom. I am using "relational" here in two ways: first, as it is described within a feminist democratic care ethics framework; secondly, as deployed within a decolonizing learning praxis. To begin with Tronto's feminist ethics of care, the *relational* view posits a world that consists "not of individuals who are the starting point for intellectual reflection, but of humans who are always in relations with others."³² To make sense of human life, she notes, we need a relational perspective that thinks through our condition of interdependency.

Bringing this relational view into the learning space requires a move away from the view of learners as individuals, and to think about learning as a group endeavor, as well as a process informed and shaped by the ways we relate to one another. As I expand below, the learning modeled in these sessions at MoDA aimed to encourage students to develop relational caring strategies towards each other and objects from the museum.

Secondly, I draw on the use of “relational” by decolonial scholars Rosalba Icaza and Rolando Vazquez.³³ As they explain, relationality “brings into focus the practices of knowledge that contribute to the fostering of diversity by enabling open and dynamic forms of interaction in which the diverse backgrounds are recognised as valuable.”³⁴ This approach has been especially important in my work with students at Middlesex University, who constitute a linguistically and ethno-culturally diverse community.³⁵ For this, it has been critical to establish *a priori* what learners bring to the learning space vis-à-vis their differences along the lines of gender, race, and class, to design sessions that build understanding in an integrative and scaffolded way. Even more important has been to gather learners’ assumptions and reflections and develop ways of working with objects that can make those different positionings explicit.

Taking the cue from these insights, as curator-pedagogue I sought to harness the affordances of object-based learning to emphasize the process of knowledge-construction as relational and collective. The aim of the sessions was to build a collaborative learning space based on the multiple meanings of museum objects, and to see these as things with a connection to the students’ present (not as things locked in the past). As I expand below, the way I approached this was twofold: on the one hand, by concentrating on experiential and multi-sensory learning using objects as sites of interrogation and critique; on the other, through a recognition of learning as co-produced, opening up objects to polysemous interpretation. In that space, I would argue, a practice of *care* emerged between things and students, which had a lot to do with the experiential and relational qualities of these encounters, and their affective resonance. This learning could not have occurred without students’ recognition that they were themselves interdependent in their process of learning, and moreover, that the objects they were working with were also part of these networks of knowledge and care, as things for which they became temporary custodians during the session (see Held 2006).

To keep my approach focused, I will specifically discuss sessions with undergraduate students in Fashion, as part of the program Fashion, Culture and Industry, among whose aims are to “challenge dominant historical narratives associated to fashion” and to develop students’ “understanding of critical issues in contemporary fashion, related to the production, consumption and mediation of fashion as a global aspect of both culture and industry” (FSH2935 Handbook 2019-20, 6). This was the specialist elective course (SEC) “Fashioning Cities,” which was concerned with the geographies of fashion in connection to discourses about modernity, globalization, and the making of cultural identities. As I elaborate below, I approached these themes in relation to MoDA’s late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century fashion-related collections to problematize questions around otherness, culture, and coloniality. These concepts provided the intellectual framework, and the objects were focal points for developing caring, attentive and responsive approaches among learners, with the view to constructing knowledge relationally.

The first session was attended by six students and took place in the study room at MoDA. The small group size enabled us to engage in a conversational style; as a facilitator, my aim was to simultaneously support students' own inquiry – based on a curated selection of objects – and to integrate this with concepts of coloniality/decoloniality. I chose objects that connected to these ideas: department store brochures and other late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century artifacts related to Japan and the British Empire. These provided the material that students would explore in small groups prompted by sequenced questions to guide their learning. To design the session, I first read extensively on decolonization,³⁶ with the aim to facilitate a session that would invite students to reflect on decoloniality as an ongoing negotiation and to critically reflect on their encounter with objects through peer-to-peer dialogue and inquiry-based learning. Unlike other museums, the history of MoDA's collections was not directly bound up with the looting of artifacts under the British Empire, settler colonialism, or the expropriation of land wrought upon Indigenous people. However, the design of many objects in the collections reflected the consumption of “other” cultures and places through commodities, and the domestic tastes of the British Empire in the 1920s-30s. As such, we could use the collections to explore histories of fashion and domestic design and their links to structures of empire. So far these objects were implicated in the production of Western ontologies connected to extractivist logics of consumption, appropriation, and exploitation of land/people/things as commodities, the collection *could* be linked to coloniality.

To clarify and concretize my pedagogical approach, I expand below how I developed this work with students and the collections.

Objects as sites of interrogation and experiential knowing

When employing the term “objects as sites of interrogation and experiential knowing” I mean that I use museum objects to engage students in critical thinking through their firsthand experience, as things which provide an interpretive lens to explore current phenomena: objects are not (just) things to *learn about*, but things to *think with*. As noted earlier, for “Fashioning Cities” I chose objects that linked to the thematic pathway that students had been exploring around global fashions, critical issues, and histories of fashion production and consumption. To achieve this, I brought out examples of department store catalogues (Liberty), designs, and other objects illustrating the fascination with Japan and the “far-east” in the late nineteenth century and the 1920s. For my approach, I was drawing on Kolb's theory of experiential learning, whereby students' encounter with material artifacts would form the basis for observation and reflection, enabling students “to focus their attention on a third thing rather than each other,” as this “thing” provides focal point for conversation.³⁷

Prior to the session, students had been given a very short extract of the 1989 essay “The World as Exhibition,” by W.J. Mitchell, on the theme of orientalism in nineteenth-century world fairs.³⁸ This introduced some ideas that would be picked up in the actual engagement with objects. Aware that these threshold concepts (commodities, otherness, orientalism) might not speak directly to the subjective experience of the students, I did not use any of these words initially in the discussions. Rather, I drew on my choice of objects to bring out the threshold concepts: department store (*commodities*),

Japanese culture and its relations to England in the early twentieth century (*otherness*), and ideas about the East in the West (*orientalism*). These provided a focus which might be more tangible and familiar for students, which they would later explore in their groups prompted by sequenced questions to guide their thinking. At the same time, by introducing these critical ideas, via Mitchell, I hoped to address a risk that Charlotte Hodge has identified, which is that students might (inadvertently) perpetuate colonialist perspectives, so observation must be situated “within a robust contextual framework.”³⁹ In this way, students were not looking at these objects in a vacuum, but they could begin to locate the material in the context of particular debates and critical issues.

To build rapport at the beginning of the session itself, I introduced a short game that related to the SEC themes of fashion, place and globalization: students would have to guess where their clothes had been made. I asked students to check each other’s tags, and this informal contact created a relaxed atmosphere which would support the later discussions. The range of places cited (USA, Bangladesh, India, Mexico) also provided the hinge for me to connect to what we were going to deal with in the session: namely, fashion as a global phenomenon that had a history of relations between places of production and consumption, as related to the MoDA collections.

Following this initial exercise, students were then given time to work in small groups with objects along with question prompts, to ensure that knowledge would be produced through their own interaction with objects. I introduced sequenced tasks building in complexity towards the threshold concepts mentioned earlier. I began with the department store, as both concept and institution, to gauge their understanding, and supported this with images that enabled me to ask them what they observed (i.e. a space destined for consumption; a social experience; modernity). I had selected objects that related to Liberty’s department store, and asked students to reflect on a set of questions about what was sold in these department stores, from where, to whom, and at what price. Through this, we could start to disentangle and question the fascination with the East in Britain at that time. Some of the questions were:

- What is the content of the catalogue or the magazine? If the object isn’t a catalogue or magazine, how would you describe it?
- Are you able to identify images of non-European clothes? What’s the language used to describe them? How are they categorized?
- How might the two objects tell us something about patterns of consumption?

Once we had established some of these practices of consumption, I asked students to consider another selection of objects in their groups. There were two kinds of objects here: some had been designed and manufactured in Britain but were inspired by Eastern artifacts, and others were Japanese artifacts. I provided minimal information, as I wanted students to use their synesthetic analysis of the objects themselves (seeing, touching, smelling), while applying the knowledge we had just learnt together (i.e. how Liberty manufactured commodities to emulate other cultures, and the acquisition of objects from other places). Through this, I aimed to raise questions about traditions of cultural influence and appropriation, including:

- Where do you think they were made?
- How do you think they were used?
- How do you think they came into this collection?

Finally, I used these approaches to the observation of objects as an opening into another discussion, which concentrated on students' own practice as designers, encouraging them to further reflect on their role as producers in relation to artifacts from other cultures and places.

At the end of the session, I asked students to reflect on what they had learnt. I distributed sticky notes and asked students to respond to complete the statement "In today's session with objects, I've learnt ...". Their comments showed how they reviewed their understanding of themselves and things around them (images, media, and objects). None of the students cited any of the threshold concepts in their comments, but it was clear from their feedback that some of their assumptions had been challenged. Students expressed how the class had taught them how to think *critically* ("I was challenged to look into a magazine or an object quite critically and ask myself questions"); *analytically* ("I should start to have another vision to the things that I can find interesting, but I never thought to think deeply about it. This session helped me to start analysing more"); and *historically* ("This session taught and showed me how to think deeper in terms of history of the objects"). In one case, the session seemed to encourage a *more nuanced understanding of concepts* such as cultural influence and consumption ("Thinking about how one thing may have more than one origin and can be influenced by so many things. Culture is spread across the world through consumption and now consumption can be positive & negative but birth new things").⁴⁰ Due to the session time slot of 1.5 h, the feedback collected was time-limited and unsystematic, and could have been improved. However, as Hodge has argued with regards to her own decolonial methodology, such sessions with objects did seem to facilitate the learning of key skills "including critical and cross-disciplinary thinking, creativity, expression, and cultural competency."⁴¹

Discussion

There are three observations to make here, which connect back to the themes of care and embodied learning. First, the knowledge that developed in these sessions was embodied, as students were asked to be responsive to and *responsible for* these museum things: they took time to sit with them, hold them and inspect them, engaging in close looking and often exhibiting curiosity. Every in-person encounter between students and objects was about inquiring and feeling their way through observation and touch; it was about honoring that moment in which the "material thing is perceived and sensorially experienced," as Sandra Dudley explains.⁴² There was at times a certain dissonance caused by the difficulty of categorizing these objects: they were not commodities anymore (even though we were discussing them as such), and neither were they items of personal attachment. Still, they held a sense of the familiarity with other objects students had seen before, either in private or public settings. Moreover, the objects did not fit squarely with the category of the museum exhibit that students might have recognized behind a museum glass case. In sum, there was an ontological looseness which enabled a

repositioning of students' own relationship with the material at hand: how to relate to these things? These were objects once discarded but which now were seen as things worth preserving, things that might merit attention and care, worthy of inquiry, and indeed things they might connect with in the most unforeseeable ways.

This leads me to the second point, which is that these relationships were process-oriented and personal, and as a result, unpredictable. The anthropologist Tim Ingold refers to the embodied ways of knowing and understanding that emerge through the interaction between human and non-human entities as both "enter into relations with one another, and even hold meanings for one another."⁴³ The disposition of objects in the classroom worked against any linear or fixed structuring of narrative meaning. Rather, their arrangement on the table welcomed gaps as a form of "parataxis," to follow Witcomb.⁴⁴ Witcomb borrows this term from Roger Simon, to explain the ways in which exhibition objects function as "propositions or clauses side by side, without indicating with conjunctions or connecting words, the relation (or coordination or subordination) between them."⁴⁵ Witcomb argues that these parataxical exhibition practices allow visitors to navigate and probe the space, to create meanings by working the spaces between the juxtapositions. In a comparable way, I would argue, this "probing" work characterized students' engagement, encouraging "analysis and participatory thinking."⁴⁶

My third and final point is that while we had provided some conceptual and historical frameworks, this experience was not about locking these objects in the past. To be clear, during the session neither myself nor any other academic staff imparted knowledge as if it were inherent to ourselves or that particular object. By not privileging the museum as a custodian of past meanings, this approach opened objects to polysemous interpretation. Although I had provided a clear framework for the session, the use of group exercises was key for inviting multiple readings which students discussed in their pairs, and then shared with the rest of the group. Hodge has noted how such group work can create a "polysemous, dialectic approach to perception."⁴⁷ In this way, the session might become "a collective process of interpretation."⁴⁸ Working with objects first-hand, we were able to challenge the temporal boundary between thing and person that is generated by museum glass cases as identified by Helen Graham. As Helen Graham argues, when displayed in glass cases, knowledge is something that is represented *to* us, and objects belong, as items of display, to a past that is "complete."⁴⁹ In the absence of glass cases, the relationship to the past that was being articulated was not one of closure; instead, it was dynamic, focused on opening multiple pathways into the past to enable different (and potentially transformative) ways of feeling our way into the future. In our discussions, I encouraged students to reflect on how these objects might bear a relationship to their present. This was particularly important for the themes of coloniality and to their role as designers.

To conclude, I would add that a distinct sensibility of care emerged. It is necessary to stress here that these encounters involved moments of silence and introspection: even as students were working in pairs or small groups, the exercises were as much about talking as they were about listening to each other. Pedagogically, this was informed by the work on learning and mindfulness by Shahjahan, Wong, and Orr, all of which invite time for reflection and contemplation.⁵⁰ In this space, students were also learning about new affective ways of being with objects *and* with each other, slowing down to practice haptic

learning, indeed they were being asked to engage in non-output-oriented or outcomes-focused learning. As evidenced by the feedback after the sessions, I would argue that these forms of collaborative object-exploration encouraged students to develop an *attentive* regard for others, a *responsibility* for the objects they were handling and for their co-produced learning, and a *responsiveness* towards each other's experiences and interpretation. Moreover, the perception of contiguity of past, present, and future, of being temporary custodians of these objects, as things which they could use, look after, and touch, enabled a sense of interdependency, even if only within the boundaries of that space.

Care in the neoliberal university?

Through the above formulations, I have emphasized the relational dimensions of learning and the role of objects as focal points for developing attentive, responsible, and responsive approaches among learners, both with objects and among themselves. While discussions around activism in museums have prompted a re-examination of curatorial practice and knowledge production,⁵¹ rarely has this gone hand in hand with a more fundamental interrogation of actual engagement practice – or indeed how we practice care. I have suggested, in this article, that a closer attention to learning processes can inform *how* future museum and heritage workers engage, but only and in so far as we place such relational practices and the forms of caring at the heart of the curriculum.

At the same time, it cannot be ignored that the landscape of the contemporary UK university is rife with uncaring logics, from the exploitative conditions of much of its workforce, precarious and insecure work, compulsory, and voluntary redundancies, all of which represent managerial directives in the pursuit of resource efficiency, value, and performance. Against this backdrop, how might caring relationships that acknowledge our interdependency flourish? To what extent is it possible to create such alternatives within the university that is so entrenched in neoliberal logics? As I have argued elsewhere, the transplanting of neoliberal forms of reasoning onto the university museum means that merits are placed on demonstrating an entrepreneurial spirit, devaluing the social by orienting students towards individual and employment gains.⁵² And yet the social, as the political theorist Wendy Brown argues, “is what binds us in ways that exceed personal ties, market exchange, or abstract citizenship.”⁵³ It is also what a logic of care makes explicit, through our sense of living as interdependent beings.

My intent here is not to contribute to the already rich debate around neoliberal governance in university education, except in relation to its effects on relational forms of learning. The development of sensibilities of care *can* occur within the crevices of the neoliberal university: it happens when we acknowledge our own positionalities, and the interdependencies of humans and non-humans, with the view to co-producing other ways of being with each other. Within the classroom space at MoDA, this was enabled by the opening of a mental and affective spaciousness which might be said to be “counterhegemonic” to “the core of neoliberal rationality.”⁵⁴ Students and staff took the risk of going into those darker areas of learning which do not fall so neatly within the university's procedures of evaluation and assessment. I would even argue that it was possible to engage students with these relational embodied pedagogies precisely because of the museum's position outside of the mainstream university curriculum. At one and the same time, this created a tension: the museum's activity could be seen as

too peripheral, and the museum has been under constant pressure to demonstrate its relevance and justify the value of its work. Unsurprisingly, this level of scrutiny presented a challenge for MoDA, in particular to the forms of pedagogy described in this paper: much of what goes on in student sessions is process-focused; it cannot be captured through quantitative data which the university collects. Thus, we can see here that any critically engaged approach that queries how knowledge is produced, challenges normative approaches to learning, and foregrounds practices of care as central to the learning itself, is particularly under threat here. In this sense, the small interventions that took place at MoDA certainly did not subvert the workings of the institution, but they may have encouraged the view – at least for some students – that there was nothing essential or inevitable about the university and its standardized procedures of learning. And, in lieu of seeing the university as a fixed thing, this may have opened up the possibility of seeing it as an entity subject to change, where teachers and students can work together towards its transformation. This bears significance, for if we take into account that many museum workers are trained in universities, the radical questioning of the status quo of the university as institution seems a crucial aspect for any activist reshaping of the museum as an institution, in both practice and discourse.

Notes

1. Olssen and Peters, “Neoliberalism, Higher Education and the Knowledge Economy”; Collett et al., “Incubating a Slow Pedagogy in Professional Academic Development”; Gill, “Breaking the Silence”.
2. Morrish, “Academic Identities in the Managed University”; Guest “Teaching on the Edge of Time”; Riyad A. Shahjahan, “Being ‘Lazy’ and Slowing Down”; Hartman and Darab, “A Call for Slow Scholarship”.
3. Barnett, *Imagining the University*; Dall’Alba, “Re-imagining the University”.
4. Morse, *The Museum as a Space of Social Care*; Dall’Alba, “Re-imagining the University”; Barnacle and Dall’Alba, “Committed to Learn”.
5. Horton and Kraftl, “Small Acts, Kind Words and “Not Too Much Fuss””; Pottinger, “Planting the Seeds of a Quiet Activism”; Griffin, “Expanding Labour Geographies”.
6. Pottinger, “Planting the Seeds of a Quiet Activism,” 215.
7. Tronto, “Creating Caring Institutions”; Held, *The Ethics of Care*.
8. Morse, *The Museum as a Space of Social Care*. See also Linnea Wallen and Docherty-Hughes, “Caring Spaces: Individual and Social Wellbeing”.
9. Ibid, 186.
10. Morse, “Care-ful Cultural Work and Health Inequalities”.
11. Morse, *The Museum as a Space of Social Care*, 186.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid, 191.
14. Ibid.
15. Dall’Alba, “Re-imagining the University,” 114.
16. Wood and Cole, “Growing an Activist Museum Professional,” 44.
17. Ibid.
18. For a history of MoDA, see Hendon, “Looking Back and Looking Forward”.
19. Hendon, “Looking Back and Looking Forward”; *Museum of Domestic Architecture & Design [sic], 1850-1950: incorporating the Silver Studio collection*.
20. Hendon, “Looking Back and Looking Forward,” 7.
21. Ibid, 141. Middlesex Polytechnic was formed in 1973, and Middlesex University was consolidated in 1992 following the Further and Higher Education Act 1992.

22. Hendon, "Looking Back and Looking Forward," 7.
23. Ibid.
24. During lockdown, the museum provided an alternative educational offer online.
25. See bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress; Teaching Community*; Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.
26. Reay, "Social Mobility, a Panacea for Austere Times"; Temple, "Idea of the Market in Financing English Higher Education".
27. Morrish, "Academic Identities in the Managed University".
28. Small, Shacklock, and Marchant, "Employability"; Chadha and Toner, "Focusing in on Employability".
29. Hide, *Impact and Engagement*, 5.
30. Kolb, *Experiential Learning*; Chatterjee and Hannan, *Engaging the Senses*. See also Willcocks, "The Power of Concrete Experience" and Woodall, "Sensory Engagements with Objects in art Galleries".
31. For a fuller account of this "co-creation" at MoDA, see Baeza Ruiz and Hendon, "Displaying Co-Creation".
32. Tronto, *Caring Democracy*, 36.
33. Icaza and Vázquez, "Diversity or Decolonisation?" 108–128.
34. Icaza and Vázquez, "Diversity or Decolonisation?" 120.
35. Peyrefitte and Lazar, "Student-centered Pedagogy and Real-world Research".
36. Vanessa, "Mapping Interpretations of Decolonization"; Maldonado-Torres, "On the Coloniality of Being"; Tuck and Wayne Yang, "Decolonization is Not a Metaphor".
37. Simon, "The Participatory Museum," 127.
38. Mitchell, "The World as Exhibition".
39. Hodge, "Decolonizing Collections-Based Learning," 146.
40. These comments were collected from students at the end of the session, using digital post-it notes.
41. Hodge, "Decolonizing Collections-Based Learning," 155.
42. Dudley, *Museum Materialities*, 5.
43. Ingold, *Correspondences*, 12.
44. Witcomb, "Toward a Pedagogy of Feeling".
45. Simon, "'Difficult' Exhibitions," 200.
46. Witcomb, "Toward a Pedagogy of Feeling," 338.
47. Hodge, "Decolonizing Collections-Based Learning," 148.
48. Burnham and Kai-Kee, *Teaching in the Art Museum*, 144.
49. Graham, "The 'Co' in Co-Production," 6.
50. Shahjahan, "On 'Being for Others'"; Wong, "Knowing through Discomfort"; Orr, "The Uses of Mindfulness in Anti-oppressive Pedagogies".
51. Janes and Sandell, *Museum Activism*.
52. Baeza Ruiz and Hendon, "Displaying Co-Creation".
53. Brown, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism*, ch. 1, para. 26.
54. Hartman and Darab, "A Call for Slow Scholarship," 57.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Zoë Hendon and Bethany Rex for their insightful comments in the early stages of writing this article. My appreciation extends to Katie Markham, Erica Robenalt, David Farrell-Banks, and Megan Todman, for their comments on preliminary drafts of the paper.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

About the author

Ana Baeza Ruiz is Research Associate at Loughborough University and the Museo del Prado (Madrid). Her research focuses on feminist art histories, debates about cultural democratization, participation and publicness in art museums past and present. Her current projects include “Feminist Art Making Histories” (University of Loughborough), a digital humanities project that aims to illuminate “untold” stories of feminist art across the UK and Ireland from the 1970s to the present day; and “Picturing Girlhood in the Museo del Prado Collections,” a project that analyses the construction of the “girl” in the Prado collections, seeking to intervene in the traditional narratives of the Prado vis-à-vis its late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century holdings of visual art.

Bibliography

- Amsler, Sarah. *The Education of Radical Democracy*. London: Routledge, 2015.
- Arashiro, Zuleika, Eugenia Demuro, and Malba Barahona. “Introduction: Thinking Through Our Voices.” In *Women in Academia Crossing North-South Borders: Gender, Race, and Displacement*, edited by Zuleika Arashiro and Malba Barahona, vii–xvii. London: Lexington Books, 2015.
- Baeza Ruiz, Ana, and Zoë Hendon. “Displaying Co-Creation: An Enquiry into Participatory Engagement at the University Museum.” In *Participatory Practices in Art and Cultural Heritage*, edited by Christoph Rausch, Ruth Benschop, Emilie Sitzia, and Vivian van Saazepp, 27–37. Cham: Springer, 2022.
- Barnacle, Robyn, and Gloria Dall’Alba. “Committed to Learn: Student Engagement and Care in Higher Education.” *Higher Education Research & Development* 36, no. 7 (2017): 1326–1338.
- Barnett, Ronald. *Imagining the university*. London: Routledge, 2013.
- Barton, Graham, and Judy Willcocks. “Object-based Self-Enquiry: A Multi- and Trans-Disciplinary Pedagogy for Transformational Learning.” *Spark: Ual Creative Teaching and Learning Journal* 2, no. 3 (2017): 229–245.
- Bhambra, Gurminder K., Dalia Gebrial, and Kerem Nişancıoğlu, eds. *Decolonising the University*. London: Pluto Press, 2018.
- Brown, Wendy. *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019.
- Burnham, Rika, and Elliott Kai-Kee. *Teaching in the Art Museum: Interpretation as Experience*. Los Angeles, CA: Getty Publications, 2011.
- Chadha, Deesha, and James Toner. “Focusing in on Employability: Using Content Analysis to Explore the Employability Discourse in UK and USA Universities.” *International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education* 14, no. 1 (2017): 1–26.
- Chatterjee, Helen, and Leonie Hannan. *Engaging the Senses: Object- Based Learning in Higher Education*. Farnham, UK and Burlington, USA: Ashgate, 2015.
- Collett, K. S., C. L. Van den Berg, Belinda Verster, and Vivienne Bozalek. “Incubating a Slow Pedagogy in Professional Academic Development: An Ethics of Care Perspective.” *South African Journal of Higher Education* 32, no. 6 (2018): 117–136. doi:10.20853/32-6-2755.
- Dall’Alba, Gloria. “Re-imagining the University: Developing a Capacity to Care.” In *The Future University: Ideas and Possibilities*, edited by Ronald Barnett, 112–122. New York: Routledge, 2012.
- De Oliveira Andreotti, Vanessa. “Mapping Interpretations of Decolonization in the Context of Higher Education.” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 4, no. 1 (2015): 21–40.
- Department for Business Innovation and Skills. *Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice*. Gov.Uk, 2016. https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/523546/bis-16-265-success-as-a-knowledge-economy-web.pdf.
- Dudley, Sandra, ed. *Museum Materialities: Objects, Engagements, Interpretations*. London: Routledge, 2013.
- Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. London: Penguin, 1993 [1970].

- Gill, Rosalind. "Breaking the Silence: The Hidden Injuries of neo-Liberal Academia." *Feministische Studien* 34, no. 1 (2016): 39–55.
- Graham, Helen. "The 'Co' in Co-Production: Museums, Community Participation and Science and Technology Studies." *Science Museum Group Journal* 5, no. 5 (2016). doi:[10.15180/160502](https://doi.org/10.15180/160502).
- Griffin, Paul. "Expanding Labour Geographies: Resourcefulness and Organising Amongst 'Unemployed Workers'." *Geoforum* 118 (2021): 159–168. doi:[10.1016/j.geoforum.2020.09.022](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2020.09.022).
- Guest, Carly J. "Teaching on the Edge of Time: Developing a Slow Pedagogy Through Feminist Science Fiction." *MAI: Feminism & Visual Culture* 5, no. Winter (2020).
- Hardie, Kirsten. "Engaging Learners through Engaging Design that Enrich and Energise Learning and Teaching." In *Engaging the Senses: Object-Based Learning in Higher Education*, edited by Helen H. Chatterjee and Leonie Hannan, 21–42. Farnham, UK and Burlington, USA: Routledge, 2016.
- Hartman, Yvonne, and Sandy Darab. "A Call for Slow Scholarship: A Case Study on the Intensification of Academic Life and Its Implications for Pedagogy." *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* 34, no. 1–2 (2012): 49–60. doi:[10.1080/10714413.2012.643740](https://doi.org/10.1080/10714413.2012.643740).
- Held, Virginia. *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, and Global*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Hendon, Zoe. "Looking Back and Looking Forward: The Silver Studio Collection as Heritage Asset and Educational Resource, 1968–2018." PhD thesis (unpublished), Middlesex University, 2021.
- Hide, Liz. *Impact and Engagement: University Museums for the 21st Century*, 2013. <http://universitymuseumsgroup.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/UMG-ADVOCACY-single.pdf>.
- Hodge, Christina J. "Decolonizing Collections-Based Learning: Experiential Observation as an Interdisciplinary Framework for Object Study." *Museum Anthropology* 41, no. 2 (2018): 142–158.
- hooks, bell. *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. New York: Routledge, 1994.
- Hooks, Bell. *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*. New York: Routledge, 2003.
- Horton, John, and Peter Kraftl. "Small Acts, Kind Words and 'not Too Much Fuss': Implicit Activisms." *Emotion, Space and Society* 2, no. 1 (2009): 14–23. doi:[10.1016/j.emospa.2009.05.003](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2009.05.003).
- Icaza, Rosalba, and Rolando Vázquez. "Diversity or Decolonisation? Researching Diversity at the University of Amsterdam." In *Decolonising the University*, edited by Gurinder K. Bhambra, Dalia Gebrial, and Kerem Nişancıoğlu, 108–128. London: Pluto Press, 2018.
- Ingold, Tim. *Correspondences*. Aberdeen: University of Aberdeen, 2017.
- Janes, Robert R., and Richard Sandell, eds. *Museum Activism*. London: Routledge, 2019.
- Kolb, David A. *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1984.
- Kreps, Christina. "University Museums as Laboratories for Experiential Learning and Engaged Practice." *Museum Anthropology* 38, no. 2 (2005): 96–111.
- Maldonado-Torres, Nelson. "On the Coloniality of Being: Contributions to the Development of a Concept." *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2–3 (2007): 240–270.
- Minocha, Sonal, Dean Hristov, and Martin Reynolds. "From Graduate Employability to Employment: Policy and Practice in UK Higher Education." *International Journal of Training and Development* 21, no. 3 (2017): 235–248. doi:[10.1111/ijtd.12105](https://doi.org/10.1111/ijtd.12105).
- Mitchell, T. "The World as Exhibition." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 31, no. 2 (1989): 217–236.
- Morrish, Liz. "Academic Identities in the Managed University: Neoliberalism and Resistance at Newcastle University, UK." *Australian Universities' Review* 59, no. 2 (2017): 23–35.
- Morse, Nuala. *The Museum as a Space of Social Care*. London: Routledge, 2020.
- Morse, Nuala. "Care-ful Cultural Work and Health Inequalities: What Roles for Museums? A UK Perspective." *Museum Worlds* 8 (2020): 124–125.
- Museum of Domestic Architecture & Design [sic], 1850–1950: Incorporating the Silver Studio Collection*. London: Middlesex University, 1990.

- Olssen, Mark, and Michael A. Peters. "Neoliberalism, Higher Education and the Knowledge Economy: From the Free Market to Knowledge Capitalism." *Journal of Education Policy* 20, no. 3 (2005): 313–345.
- Orr, Deborah. "The Uses of Mindfulness in Anti-Oppressive Pedagogies: Philosophy and Praxis." *Canadian Journal of Education* 27 (2002): 477–490.
- Peyrefitte, Magali, and Gillian Lazar. "Student-centered Pedagogy and Real-World Research: Using Documents as Sources of Data in Teaching Social Science Skills and Methods." *Teaching Sociology* 46, no. 1 (2018): 62–74.
- Pottinger, Laura. "Planting the Seeds of a Quiet Activism." *Area* 49, no. 2 (2017): 215–222. doi:10.1111/area.12318.
- Reay, Diane. "Social Mobility, a Panacea for Austere Times: Tales of Emperors, Frogs, and Tadpoles." *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 34, no. 5–6 (2013): 660–677. doi:10.1080/01425692.2013.816035.
- Shahjahan, Riyad A. "Being 'Lazy' and Slowing Down: Toward Decolonizing Time, our Body, and Pedagogy." *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 47, no. 5 (2015): 488–501. doi:10.1080/00131857.2014.880645.
- Shahjahan, Riyad A. "On 'Being for Others': Time and Shame in the Neoliberal Academy." *Journal of Education Policy* 35, no. 6 (2020): 785–811. doi:10.1080/02680939.2019.1629027.
- Simon, Nina. "The Participatory Museum." *Museum* 2 (2010). <https://www.participatorymuseum.org/read/>
- Small, Lynlea, Kate Shacklock, and Teresa Marchant. "Employability: A Contemporary Review for Higher Education Stakeholders." *Journal of Vocational Education & Training* 70, no. 1 (2018): 148–166.
- Temple, Paul. "The Idea of the Market in Financing English Higher Education." In *Valuing Higher Education: An Appreciation of the Work of Gareth Williams*, edited by Ronald Barnett, Paul Temple, and Peter Scott, 42–59. London: Trentham Books, IOE Press, Institute of Education, 2016.
- Tronto, Joan C. "Creating Caring Institutions: Politics, Plurality, and Purpose." *Ethics and Social Welfare* 4, no. 2 (2010): 158–171. doi:10.1080/17496535.2010.484259.
- Tronto, Joan C. *Caring Democracy*. New York: New York University Press, 2013.
- Tuck, Eve, and K. Wayne Yang. "Decolonization is Not a Metaphor." *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 1–40.
- Wallen, Linnea, and John R. Docherty-Hughes. "Caring Spaces: Individual and Social Wellbeing in Museum Community Engagement Experiences." *Journal of Museum Education* 47, no. 1 (2022): 93–102. doi:10.1080/10598650.2021.2021490.
- Willcocks, Judy. "The Power of Concrete Experience: Museum Collections, Touch and Meaning Making in Art and Design Pedagogy." In *Engaging the Senses: Object-Based Learning in Higher Education*, edited by Helen H. Chatterjee, and Leonie Hannan, 43–56. Routledge, 2016.
- Witcomb, Andrea. "Toward a Pedagogy of Feeling: Understanding How Museums Create a Space for Cross-Cultural Encounters." In *The International Handbooks of Museum Studies, Vol. 1*, edited by Sharon Macdonald, Helen Rees Leahy, Andrea Witcomb, Conal McCarthy, Michelle Henning, Annie E. Coombes, and Ruth B. Phillips, 321–344. Wiley-Blackwell, 2015.
- Wong, Yuk-Lin Renita. "Knowing Through Discomfort: A Mindfulness-Based Critical Social Work Pedagogy." *Critical Social Work* 4, no. 1 (2004): 1–9. <https://ojs.uwindsor.ca/index.php/csw/article/download/5636/4606?inline=>.
- Wood, Elizabeth, and Sarah A. Cole. "Growing an Activist Museum Professional." In *Museum Activism*, edited by Robert R. Janes and Richard Sandell, 36–46. London: Routledge, 2019.
- Woodall, Alexandra Caroline. "Sensory Engagements with Objects in art Galleries: Material Interpretation and Theological Metaphor." PhD diss, University of Leicester, 2016.