

# The School Teacher and the Art Museum: A Multi-Case Study of Online Canadian Art Museum Teacher Resources

Julie Etheridge, Concordia University, Montreal  
[etheridgejulie@hotmail.com](mailto:etheridgejulie@hotmail.com)

**Abstract:** This study seeks to better understand the online resources and lesson contents that Canadian art museums offer secondary school art teachers. The author conducted a content analysis of online teacher resources and lessons developed by four Canadian art museums during 2016. By looking at the various resources through the lens of a high school teacher/researcher, the author highlighted how these resources presented differences in curriculum and fostered self-reflection in students. The relationship between the art museum and the school teacher was examined. To better understand this relationship, further research on online resources developed by museums to increase pedagogical possibilities should be conducted.

**Key Words:** Teacher; Museum; Online Teaching Resources; Art Education; Canadian Art Museum; Art Gallery Resources

My memories of art history class are situated in a period in art education when the teacher placed two slide projectors side by side and talked for the whole class, while students diligently took notes. The works of art were selected from the generic Western canon, with a unit covering Canadian art devoted to the Group of Seven and Emily Carr. I remember memorizing dates, names, and titles for tests without any real in-depth knowledge of the works of art. Discussions and personal interpretations did not enter the classroom. The art history curriculum, as Pearse (2006) notes, focused on a model that art was intended for cultural refinement.

When I began teaching as an arts specialist in 2001 at a public high school in Quebec, I chose not to teach art appreciation similar to how I was taught. However, I had great difficulty finding adequate visual and print resources to support the kind of teaching I wanted to do. Like many teachers, I relied on my university art history textbooks, slides donated from museums, and black and white transparencies. Presently, with the expansive online collection of free art teaching resources, it is much easier for classroom teachers to advance their knowledge and to find resources to complement their teaching practices. When using Google to search for an art appreciation lesson plan, a glut of ready-made PowerPoint presentations and MOOCs (massive online open courses) surface. I wondered: How does a teacher sift through and select trustworthy material?

According to Wetterlund (2008), the art museum is regarded by teachers as a reputable resource due to the perception of trustworthiness and the authoritarian hold on art appreciation. However, instead of using the art museum as a resource, Knutson, Crowley, Russell & Steiner (2011) suggest that teachers tend to view the art museum as the site for the yearly field trip. Occasionally the field trip links to a classroom theme, and sometimes it remains an isolated learning experience.

With the continuous creation of free resources from the Internet, I was curious to know the content that art museums provide teachers for an art appreciation lesson. I expected to find a teaching resource superior to websites filled with various mash-ups, of what Efland (1976) famously coins “school art style.” After viewing several art museum websites from across North America, I decided that I preferred content designed for teachers working Canadian schools. I then searched various Canadian art museums websites for classroom teaching resources. My exploration was guided by the following questions: What online resources do Canadian art museums offer to secondary school art teachers? What is the content of the lessons provided?

## Literature Review

### Curriculum challenges

As Miller and Seller (1990) note that the crafted curriculum rooted in personal meaning is at the core of an art teacher’s practice. Teaching is too often situated in a process where the students learn facts and skills instead of constructing new knowledge. In a transformation curriculum, students focus on personal and social change through their learning. The difficulty in creating such a learning environment is adjusting from knowledge as content to knowledge as process. Pinar (2012) asserts that when teachers work from a curriculum with scripted lessons that are not their own, the learning for both the students and the teacher is diluted. Instead, curricula are guidelines that allow for teachers to apply their imagination and creativity.

Furthermore, according to Gude (2013), curricula in schools continue to focus on learning art elements and principles, and thus generates superficial discussions concerning works of art. Gude (2013) contends that art teachers need to foster learning environments that invite authentic discussions about works of art and allow students to immerse themselves with real-life themes. Quality art-making provides students with the tools to understand and participate in contemporary cultural conversations, while generating new knowledge (Gude, 2013). Anderson (1993) recommends the process of critical analysis to enable students to develop personal awareness and new knowledge, while looking at a work of art. Students start by asserting a personal reaction to a work of art, and then proceed to visually analyze and contextualize it to generate a personal interpretation. On one hand, I agree with Pinar (2012), Miller & Seller (1990), Anderson (1993), and Gude (2013)’s assertions that curricula should be grounded in personal meaning. On the other hand, teachers who are beginning their career may have limited knowledge of art appreciation. In addition, they may not want to broaden their knowledge regarding teaching works of art, and will likely need assistance.

Wetterlund (2008) suggests that art museums can be a valuable educational resource for the art teacher. Williams (1996) claims that since 1984, there has been an increase in the variety of teacher services, workshops, and resource materials available in American art museums. The art museum’s emergence as a site for teacher training suggests that museums provide a different set of skills, knowledge, and experiences than what art teachers hold in their toolboxes (Matthewson-Mitchell, 2008; Yuan, Stephenson, & Hickman, 2015; Knutson, Crowley, Russell, & Steiner, 2011). However, as museums shift to helping teachers, it should be noted that the approaches found in the art museum space differ greatly from those in the classroom space. Duh (2015) reminds us that museum pedagogy follows a specific type of structure that is quite different from school pedagogy, and arts curricula in classrooms. Objectives may be similar and complementary. However, the informal learning environment of the museum contrasts with the formal learning of the classroom in which students’ learning is evaluated. Hein (2011) and

Mayer (2005) both note that art museum education has shifted from a transmission model of learning to a more constructivist approach in which the museum educator invites participants to form personal meaning from looking at works of art. While a constructivist approach may be liberating, it can be challenging for the classroom teacher. As Hein (2011) suggests, the difficulty with this approach is knowing whether the process was successful. It is difficult to consider the question: Did the participants consider how the work of art relates to their life?

While Hein (2011) questions whether the various techniques used in the museum space are transferable to the classroom, Matthewson-Mitchell (2008) insists that the informal learning model in the art museum setting could have a broader relevance to the school-based learning model. Instead of relying on the curriculum's scripted lessons (Pinar, 2012), teachers could apply the model of pedagogy demonstrated by the art museum to promote authentic learning. However, the art museum's informal learning approaches will only be used by teachers when they understand how it can be applied in the classroom. Art museums and schools rarely engage in discussions about learning and may not be aware of how their programs could be more complementary. Gilmore and Rentschler (2002) suggest that art museums want to be included as an integral part of the school art curriculum. To attract the teacher visitor, museums host teacher tours and information nights, provide printed resources, and offer professional development. Furthermore, museums have worked hard to generate relationships between school curricula and their own missions, collections, and displays.

### Online Resources

When an art museum designs a specific website page devoted to an audience, it sends the implied message that the target group is vital to the museum's community (Quinlan-Gagnon, 2012). This can be witnessed with the increase in online educational materials for teachers. However, what types of online resource materials do art museums make available to teachers? Varisco & Cates (2005) address this question in their research, when they survey online learning materials developed by art museums for teachers. They conclude that the online teacher resources mostly illuminate collections and exhibitions. Furthermore, they observe that the online lesson plans tend to support formal K–12-related curricula. Additionally, certain resources are simply repurposed educational materials from past exhibitions and are not classroom-specific resources. Varisco & Cates (2005)' observations may suggest that museums' online resources are a form of marketing. The Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) has developed numerous online teacher resources (Mazzola, 2015). For example, it developed a MOOC for teachers focusing on concrete skills and strategies teachers could apply in classrooms. The course includes videos, discussion, readings, and quizzes. While Mazzola (2015) insists that the goal of the resource is to foster peer-to-peer learning, this online resource was also a successful marketing tool. It attracted 17,000 teachers globally and from a variety of disciplines to view the artwork from the particular MOMA collection.

### Expanding the Art Classroom

While resources are available online for art teachers to reference, it does not necessarily connote that these resources are intended to be used in classrooms. Gray-Rodriguez (2015) questions how often teachers expand on their fieldtrip museum visit with online pre-visit and post-visit activities, once returned to the classroom. Although the activities are intended to enhance the learning and experience of visiting the museum, not all teachers may believe it is necessary to extend the museum experience into the classroom. Novak & Hulsbosch (2012)

observed that little research explored how teachers use the various resources designed by art museums for classrooms. In fact, research states that teachers tend to “cherry-pick” the most appealing or useful sections of the resources. Furthermore, the authors suggest that such resources may limit teachers by implying curricular frameworks regarding how the classroom sees and engages with the artworks. Novak & Hulsbosch (2012) conclude that further studies on how kits are used in the classroom, the effects on student learning, and teaching programming are necessary.

### **Methodology**

To carry out this exploratory research, I selected a sample of four Canadian art museums: the Vancouver Art Gallery (VAG); the Art Gallery of Alberta (AGA); the Winnipeg Art Gallery (WAG); and the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO). I then conducted a content analysis of one lesson plan for each museum that would be relevant to my high school art teaching practice in Quebec (Plano & Creswell, 2008; Yin, 2003). I selected the four art museums because they have a highly active online teacher resource page that is continually updated with new content. This study is a snapshot of online art gallery resources available in November 2016.<sup>1</sup>

To explore the research questions, I created a collective case study to describe and compare one lesson plan from each museum. While one lesson plan cannot imply a generalization, it may present insights into online resources. The selected lesson plans contained either works of art or activities that I was unfamiliar with.

To carry out the data collection, I viewed the homepage website of the sample art museums, and looked for a link that would lead me to the teacher resource page. For all the art museums, the teacher lesson plans were found within several layers of the museum’s website. By comparing the lesson plans, I hoped to gain greater insights into what art museums present to teachers as classroom teaching resources. By looking at the data through the lens of a teacher/researcher, I was limited to content of interest to my own classroom practice, and one lesson plan from each of the art museums (Titscher, Meyer, Wodak, & Vetter, 2000).

### Case Study 1: Vancouver Art Gallery

The online resources for teachers on the Vancouver Art Gallery (VAG, 2016) website consisted of various *Teacher’s Study Guides*. The study guides web page was devoted to downloadable lessons described by the museum as “study guides.” Starting from 2008, there were approximately 50 guides that related to past museum exhibitions. Several were devoted to the Group of Seven and Emily Carr. I selected the guide called, “MashUp: The Post-War: Cut, Copy and Quotation in the Age of Mass Media,” from spring 2016. No grade level was indicated and I deemed that the sophisticated language of the resource would suit a high school audience. The museum placed a helpful letter addressed to the teacher on the first main page of the guide. The letter advised the teacher to use the guide as preparation for their upcoming visit to the museum. The guide contained a half-page of background information about the exhibition. It also included several pages of information on the featured artists and their various mediums. Following this information, four pre- and/or post-visit activity choices were provided. Activities ranged from discussing the artists to creating a stylistic artwork similar to the artists. A vocabulary list was provided to aid the teacher with terms they might not know. For the activity entitled, “About the Artists,” a printable student worksheet template was provided in which students were meant to extract information from the “Artist Information Sheet.” A list of open-

ended questions and step-by-step procedures were provided for each activity. There were no clear links to government school curricula (VAG, 2016).

### Case Study 2: Art Gallery of Alberta

On the Art Gallery of Alberta (AGA, 2016) website, I was invited to use the “Classroom Resources” before visiting the museum. From the four resources available, I selected the “Art Beyond Borders: Educator Resource Package,” because it was clearly labelled as a resource for Grade 7 to 12. The resource asked the teacher to invite students to reflect on their concept of the world, and question how it connects to the views of the artist (AGA, 2016). The instructions indicated that the resource would prepare students for a visit to the museum. The other in-class activities would help to generate connections to the bigger ideas drawn from the exhibition.

The “Big Ideas” section of the resource contained one main open-ended question with a list of ideas and statements. The reader was instructed to brainstorm with their students about how art is aligned with our collective lives and cultures. Several guidelines concerning how to facilitate the discussion were provided under “Helpful Hints.” Hints included encouraging the students to look more closely at the works of art and to think critically. The second activity contained a printable student worksheet. The resource also suggested teachers could find additional images of artwork online or from specific books. A pre-selected list of artists or works of art were not provided. The resource included a list of curriculum connections to the Alberta’s Ministry of Education’s standards of education, including connections to social studies and fine arts (Alberta Ministry of Education, 2016). Specific codes from the ministry’s curriculum documents were present for social studies. However, none were present for the fine arts category (AGA, 2016).

### Case Study 3: The Winnipeg Art Gallery

On the Winnipeg Art Gallery (WAG, 2016) website, I found “Teacher’s Corner”: a page devoted to teachers. An advertisement noted that new digital materials for teachers would be available soon and invited teachers to visit the site regularly for resources that support the educational curriculum of Manitoba (WAG, 2016). The word “fun” was used to describe the teacher resources, which were geared toward elementary or middle school classrooms. The materials were based on resources from previous exhibitions. I selected, “Every Painting Tells a Story,” which was based on a painting by Salvador Dali. The first main page contained an advertisement to book a tour. Three activities were offered to select from, that all focused on looking at the painting by Dali. Step-by-step questions were included, to help teachers generate a dialogue with the students and give instructions for the activities. The activities focused on looking and creative writing. A printable worksheet was provided for writing a creative story. I was reminded to, “Accept all guesses and/or ideas with a positive response” (WAG, 2016). A list of “General Learning Outcomes” taken from the curriculum standards of Manitoba were provided at the end of the resource. The resource contains suggested learning outcomes for the English language arts and for the visual arts (Winnipeg Art Gallery, 2016).

### Case Study 4: The Art Gallery of Ontario

On the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO, 2016) website, I found the “Activities and Resources” website page. All but one resource focusing on how to critically analyze a work of art were related to current or past exhibitions. I selected the most recent resource, “Mystical Landscapes: Masterpieces from Monet, Van Gogh and more.” The first page offered an image of

a Vincent van Gogh painting, along with a synopsis of the exhibition and key themes. The resource asked teachers to consider how they could make works of art relevant to the lives of their students and to use the exhibition as a form of inquiry. Teachers were invited to be creative with the resource. A list of “Key Exhibition Themes” was provided with no artist biographies. Teachers were provided with a list of questions that invited multi-sensory reflection. The next activity focused on applying the critical analysis process (Anderson, 1993) using one of van Gogh’s paintings. Many questions followed, focusing on helping students express their opinions and generate broader connections to society. The next section of the resource titled, “Creative Responses and Curriculum Connections,” was divided into grade levels. Suggested discussion, research and art-making activities were meant for teachers who have knowledge in teaching visual arts. There were no clear guidelines, templates or step-by-step instructions to help lead them through a lesson. Instead, there were “jumping-off points” or ideas for teachers. The website page included Ontario education curriculum connections to several subject areas with clearly labelled numerical codes. There was a strong focus on the arts curriculum. The final section of the resource consisted of additional information based on types of landscape paintings, and a list of artists in the exhibition sorted by country (AGO, 2016).

After reviewing the lesson plans from the sample art museums, I developed a set of open codes to track items of interest. An example is the use of the word “engage” to describe how the teacher is meant to interact with their students (Creswell, 2008; Yin, 2003). Using these codes, I reviewed the lesson plans again, and looked for emerging data that was similar or for omissions. Three themes emerged from the process: curriculum, framing, and perception of the classroom teacher.

## Findings

### An Education Tool

The online teacher resources from the sample selection of art museums were positioned as an educational tool to be used in the teacher’s classroom. This suggests that teachers need to prepare their students for a museum visit and extend the visit afterwards into their teaching. While the VAG, AGA and WAG all encouraged critical thinking, only the AGO declared that their resource was based on the critical analysis process (Anderson, 1993). Each of the lesson plans for the VAG, AGA and WAG took a constructivist approach to learning with the use of scaffolding questions to generate conversations. All of the resources reflected artworks in the museums’ permanent collection or in temporary exhibitions. Furthermore, only the VAG presented the teacher with artwork other than paintings, because the resource was based on an exhibition of artists who worked in various mediums. Links with provincial curriculum documents were included to demonstrate how the lesson could be used in the art classroom with disciplines such as social sciences and language arts. When a studio project was included in the resource, it either was highly structured to mimic the work of the artist (in the case of the VAG) or was a creative opening as witnessed (in the AGO resource). The intended teacher audience for the museum’s resources varied significantly. Non-art specialists would be able to follow the WAG’s clearly defined step-by-step process to looking at works of art. The extensive background information and terminology of the VAG’s resource, in addition to the AGO’s supplementary studio projects, would entice a visual arts teacher. None of the lesson plans referenced learning or used the word “learn.” They instead used words such as “create knowledge,” “think critically,” and “inquire.”

### How to Look at Works of Art

All the art museum resources suggested how teachers and students should engage with works of art. Three of the museums described their resource as helping to develop visual literacy and critical thinking. Students were continually invited to make personal connections with the works of art. Only the AGO invited students to explore and express feelings. The VAG focused on acquiring concrete information pertaining to the artists and works of art. None of the resources encouraged teachers to focus on the elements and principles of art (Gude, 2013). Instead, resources encouraged teachers to use the works of art as starting points for conversations. Teachers were invited to generate conversations by asking students to make connections between the works of art and their own lived experiences. They were also encouraged to use open-ended questions, found in the informal learning style of the museum. If the questioning technique was ineffective, students were invited to react with a written response. Writing was encouraged by all the museums. Interestingly, none of the resources invited an artistic or tactile visual arts response, such as drawing thumbnail sketches.

### The Role of the Teacher

The resources reveal the types of roles the museum believes the classroom teacher plays in the museum experience. All the museums coached teachers as to how to make use of the resource. The VAG positioned their resource as a study guide for an upcoming visit. The museum resources directed teachers to engage and encourage their students. They advised teachers to focus on generating discussions and to use studio projects as an approach to complement these discussions. Both the VAG and the WAG recommended teachers adapt the lessons to fit within their classroom practice. Only the AGO supported teachers in being creative with the resource. The sample resources were designed to prepare or extend field trips to the sample museums. The teacher was requested to spend class time to ensure their students got the most from the field trip.

## **Discussion**

### Authentic Conversations

The sample art museums rarely referred to art elements and art principles, which tend to dominate classroom discussions (Gude, 2013). There was no indication that museums are narrowing and simplifying discussions (Mayer, 2005). Instead, students were encouraged to be reflective and generate authentic conversations (Anderson, 1993). The goal of looking at works of art was to connect to contemporary issues to the everyday lives of the students. All of the resources were grounded in helping students generate personal meaning from their interaction with art. Several focused on a constructivist approach to learning. Nevertheless, while generating meaningful and authentic discussions is important to a classroom environment, as Hein (2011) suggests, there are pitfalls to focusing on reflection or, as the WAG encouraged, to accepting all answers from the students. This is because teachers still need to ensure that students reach learning objectives, such as acquiring and applying specific vocabulary. Indeed, Hein (2011) asks: How does a teacher know if students are constructing personal links with the works of art and not daydreaming during a class discussion?

The resources provided insight into the relationship between the classroom teacher and the art museum. The teacher was perceived as either a novice or an expert. This can be witnessed

by the variety of lessons that either had specific step-by-step instructions for the novice, or a supply of open-ended questions that an expert would appreciate. Furthermore, teachers were instructed to review materials before they visited the museum. While the challenge of an online resource is to appeal to a wide audience, it is clearly difficult to create a resource that can be rooted in personal meaning for the teacher (Miller & Seller, 1990). As noted, only the AGO invited teachers to create their own personal meaning with the resource and be creative (Pinar, 2012).

### Museum Pedagogy and the Classroom

As Duh (2015) notes, museums tend to embrace pedagogical approaches that contrast with the formal learning environment of the classroom. The pedagogy of the classroom focuses on objectives established by the various provincial ministries of education. Although the art museum is not involved with the formal instruction or evaluation of students, the AGA, WAG, and AGO linked provincial curricula to their online resources. As Matthewson-Mitchell (2008) observes, this approach is meant to demonstrate to the classroom teacher how the resource could have broader relevance to classroom learning. However, it is unclear by the vocabulary and tone applied in the VAG's resource if a non-art specialist would be able to use the resource. Furthermore, as Yuan, Stephenson and Hickman (2015) note, teachers may not be educated to teach visual literacy or apply informal strategies. All of the sample museums suggested creative as an avenue for responding. However, this approach may hinder engagement and learning for students who have difficulty with writing (Mayer, 2005). The studied resources suggested that museum educators be aware of the teaching dynamics that occur within the classroom. They also suggested that museums expect teachers to expand the field trip afterwards into the classroom, which Gray-Rodriguez (2015) suggests is rare. Some of the activities recommended could be challenging to implement in a classroom. For example, based on my past teaching schedule, some of the suggested activities would take over two weeks to complete. For resources to be more compatible with classroom teaching, museum educators and classroom teachers need to work more closely together to understand each other (Gilmore & Rentschler, 2002).

### Online Resources

Based on the resources of the sample museums, the museums were trying to attract the teacher to either visit the museum, as witnessed with the WAG's advertisements to book a tour, or act as a resource for lessons that can be incorporated into their classrooms (Gilmore & Rentschler, 2002). At first glance, it appeared that teachers were a vital part of the museum's community, since the museums invested in and developed online resources to support teachers (Quinlan-Gagnon, 2012). However, after further exploration, I noticed that the resources were mostly digitized lessons from past or present exhibitions. As Varisco & Cates (2005) observe, online art museum resources are notably repurposed activities. Museums may settle for this practice because they have limited financial resources to develop classroom supports. Nonetheless, increased resources intended to help both non-art specialists and visual arts specialist teachers develop concrete skills and strategies would be beneficial (Knutson, Crowley, Russell, & Steiner, 2011).

### **Conclusion**

By conducting a content analysis of the selected online resources developed by the VAG, AGA, WAG and AGO for teachers to use in their classrooms, I have discovered various types of

learning content. The sample resources illuminated how museums propose teachers should use works of art in their classrooms. One favoured approach invited students to generate connections with personal meaning. Nonetheless, the teacher was not necessarily invited to be creative (Pinar, 2012). Furthermore, teachers may be unfamiliar with the constructivist approach to teaching or the critical analysis process in art education (Anderson, 1993). In addition, the online resources provided may not meet the needs of classroom teachers or be used in classrooms, as Matthewson-Mitchell (2008) and Gray-Rodriguez (2015) suggest. This exploratory study demonstrates a need: to investigate the types of online resources that teachers require from art museums, and to examine how teachers can benefit from these resources to spark creativity and invigorate their teaching. As Knutson, Crowley, Russell and Steiner (2011) propose, art museums and schools need to foster a stronger relationship to develop better tools for learning that go beyond field trips.

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<sup>i</sup> Since conducting the research for this paper in November 2016, the content of the teacher pages for all of the art museums has been updated. Most notable is that the Art Gallery of Alberta no longer posts teacher classroom resources.