

# Unlocking the value of practical learning: A museum conservation perspective at the National University of Singapore Museum

LAWRENCE CHIN, MICHELLE KUEK & CLAIRE LIM

## Abstract

*Practical knowledge and its acquisition can often be hampered by a lack of real-life situations to learn through the act of reiterative processes. University museums are uniquely positioned to offer opportunities that promote practical learning by being connected to a network of tertiary scholarship, on the one hand, and actual operational needs of an organization anchored in real-world experiences, on the other. This paper is an attempt to highlight the range of programs that have been undertaken through a variety of models of collaboration and funding that seek to enhance practical learning through a museum conservation practice viewpoint.*

## Introduction

The value of learning through practice, or what has been termed as situated learning (LAVE & WEIGNER 1991; LAVE 1996), has gained wide acceptance and adherence. Museums, in general, and university museums, in particular, are institutions that are well-suited to the notion of communities of practice (SMITH 2009) that enable such learning to take place. Even though there is broad agreement in the value of learning through practice, nevertheless, the actual resources needed for sustaining such a practice of learning may be financially daunting and, in the specific context of a university museum, difficult to secure for one reason or other.

## Working with constraints

It is against such considerations that The Conservation Studio was set up as a public-private-partnership at the National University of Singapore (hereinafter called NUS) Museum in 2008. The utmost and primary intention was to provide in-house conservation services for the museum's holding collections, exhibition programs and loans. However, a clear intention and focus from the start was also to provide a vehicle for the realization of programs that would raise the awareness of conservation and preservation practices. Such a broad-base approach to learning in the museum through conservation practice was to be undertaken over and above the more technical aspects of conservation and preservation work in a museum context.

An immediate consideration was to secure funding for such programs. The specific arrangement between The Conservation Studio and the NUS Museum for the payment of rental for use of the museum conservation workspace helped to create a ready source of internal funding which could be channelled for conservation-related work on the museum's collections and exhibitions or the realization of programs, taking the forms of talks, workshops, internships and professional exchanges.

## Talks and workshops

One of the more cost-effective ways, in terms of time management, of disseminating information is via educational talks. However, a delivered talk is also the least conducive environment to experience learning in a practical setting. Therefore, the choice of the content of the talks has been carefully selected to reflect a consistent emphasis on materials, practices and principles related to museum conservation work. In particular, the emphasis of the talks would focus on the value of learning through the actual process of discovering and interacting with materials.

A well-received talk, *Colors as Objects*, looked at the combination of historical development of artists' pigments as well as the chemical and physical basis of understanding the phenomena of color. The

role of colors in connoting social status and wealth was juxtaposed with the very early tedious and labor-intensive process of manufacturing these same colors. This allowed the audience to rethink their relationship with colors and also understand some manner of working with colors.

Coupled with the talk, a workshop for students from the School of the Arts in 2011 was also developed. The set-up for this practicum allowed the students to experience the various ways of investigating materials and colors through ultra-violet illumination, infrared imaging and microscopy. This helped to concretize the learning points of the talk for the audience, even though it required more preparation, effort and time.

### **Internships**

In tandem with talks and workshops, The Conservation Studio accepts a number of student interns each year. As there are no formal training programs for conservation or museology in Singapore, such internships has become a means of introducing the fields and creating a pathway into these highly technical and professional fields for the students.

Students are exposed to, and supervised for, a variety of conservation-related work in assessing and surveying collections, implementing preventive conservation measures, preparatory work for exhibitions and loans, and actual conservation work on artworks and artefacts. With additional income from working on collections outside of the NUS Museum, the studio has been able to set aside some funding to pay for a stipend for all the student interns.

The selection of the student interns was based largely on interest and self-motivation in approaching the museum or studio to request for an internship. Owing to the lack of formal programs in Singapore mentioned earlier, the range of academic backgrounds that the student interns come from has been diverse, including arts management and fine arts (from LASALLE College of the Arts); Southeast Asian studies, literature and facilities management (from National University of Singapore); photography (from Nanyang Technological University); and high school students (from NUS High School for Science and Mathematics and Raffles Institution).

The eclectic mix of student interns has also been instrumental in fostering an environment where interaction and openness are valued. As a result, the student interns have been able to learn rapidly and keenly, even though they were exposed to an unfamiliar field of knowledge and practice. The informal nature of the program, although time-consuming at times, also encourages a wider sense of curiosity and self-directed learning both within and outside of the studio.

### **Professional exchanges**

Continuing education for professionals already in the museum field is an important aspect of the learning and updating of knowledge required in our fast-changing world. However, conducting a full program for museum professionals can be highly resource intensive, as well as expensive for participants having to pay for travel, accommodation and the participation fee.

An alternate model, arising from two separate requests from Galeri Petronas (located in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, which requested for preventive conservation training) and Lopez Museum (located in Manila, Philippines, which requested for microscopy training), was trialed at The Conservation Studio in collaboration with NUS Museum. Each workshop was organized around the needs and experience of the participants in mind, with a range of topics and activities to suit the learning outcomes. In order to help reduce the overall cost of attending the workshop, the participants' fee, which paid for the trainer's salary, was funded directly by NUS Museum, utilizing the funds accrued from the rental of the conservation studio. A more responsive approach in the planning stage of the

workshop was also evident as the funding for the trainer was kept flexible, depending on needs, yet fully covered.

### **Making small progresses**

Although the primary function of The Conservation Studio is not one of education, the engagement with various individuals and organizations has helped to open up a richer understanding of the larger learning and educational communities, in addition to the museum and heritage communities. Such accrued awareness can be useful as feedback for future practice in trying to stay relevant to the society at large.

Even in trying to establish a practice-based context for learning, it is also important to be aware of the limitations and short-coming of such an approach (ANDERSON, REDER & SIMON 1996; ROBERTS 2006). This paper highlighted some of the issues related to intensive use of resources and time needed for an effective transfer of knowledge in such practice-based settings. Nevertheless, the benefits and necessities of such practice-led learning remain clear, albeit as a complimentary approach to learning and knowledge acquisition in today's world.

### **Extending and practicing communities**

Through a range of programs, that seek to compliment the larger mission of the NUS Museum, an additional intangible effect was establishing linking to other institutions of learning with the hope of familiarizing the next generation of students with museum and heritage work. This is to put in place some semblance of a community of practice which would consists of a flexible network of interested and dedicated individuals or organizations working towards the realization of long-term museum-related and heritage-related objectives.

The specific focus on museum and heritage of such a community of practice must also in turn seek out and interact with other like-minded communities of practice in order to facilitate a broad-ranging exchange of ideas and practice. The university museum is unique in that it is already positioned between academia and material collections, between learning and practice, between thinking and doing. And that would be its greatest intrinsic value and work.

### **Acknowledgments**

The authors would like to thank all staff and volunteers at the National University of Singapore Museum and The Conservation Studio for help with the various public and outreach programs that made museum conservation work better understood and appreciated.

### **Literature cited**

- ANDERSON, J. R., L. M. REDER & H. A. SIMON 1996. Situated learning and education. *Department of Psychology, Paper 1*. [repository.cmu.edu/psychology/1](http://repository.cmu.edu/psychology/1) (accessed November 12, 2012).
- LAVE, J. & E. WENGER 1991. *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- LAVE, J. 1996. Teaching, as learning, in practice. *Mind, Culture, and Activity* 3, 3: 149–164.
- ROBERTS, J. 2006. Limits of Communities of Practice. *Journal of Management Studies* 43, 3: 623–639.
- SMITH, M. J. 2009. Jean Lave, Etienne Wenger and communities of practice. *The encyclopedia of informal education*. [www.infed.org/biblio/communities\\_of\\_practice.htm](http://www.infed.org/biblio/communities_of_practice.htm) (accessed November 12, 2012).

**Contact**

Lawrence Chin

Conservator

The Conservation Studio

Address: My Mail Box 888612, Singapore 919191, Republic of Singapore

E-mail: conservation.studio(at)gmail.com

Michelle Kuek

Assistant Manager, Outreach

National University of Singapore Museum

Address: 50, Kent Ridge Crescent, Singapore 119279, Republic of Singapore

E-mail: michellekuek(at)nus.edu.sg

Claire Lim

Conservator

The Conservation Studio

Address: My Mail Box 888612, Singapore 919191, Republic of Singapore

E-mail: conservation.studio(at)gmail.com