

Engaging with Collections: An Introduction to Research Methodology

Marshall University Department of Sociology & Anthropology

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Time: 11:00 am - 12:45 pm

Location: MU Archaeological and Ethnological Lab, Basement of Old Main (OM BE14)

Description

This plan outlines a 75-105 minute workshop covering a general introduction to engaging with ethnological collections as primary resources in anthropological research. It encompasses a mini research experience, designed to pique student interest in collections research and introduce them to basic skills and concepts. The workshop will combine seminar learning with hands-on skill development, alternating between individual study and group discussion of findings and their implications.

Learning Objectives

This workshop is designed to accommodate social science students with very low familiarity with ethnological collections. At the end of this session, students will have an understanding of how collections come to exist in repositories as well as some of the contemporary anthropological issues surrounding ethnological collections. They will have developed the skills necessary to conduct research on collections, including critical engagement with collections documentation and careful analysis of the objects themselves.

Overview

The workshop is broken down into five parts: acquainting students with the relevance of collections; leading through the basics of museum collections; the history and scope of Marshall's collection; an introduction to research methodology; and the potential of further research.

Introductions (~5 min.)

We'll begin by introducing ourselves to one another and to the concepts at hand. I'll spend a short period of time getting to know the students, discussing their level of familiarity with museums, collections, and material culture studies, as well as learning about research and career interests.

How Collections Come Together (~10 min.)

Collections are complex assemblages that are shaped by modes of production, collector preferences and assumptions, and individual museum practices. In this section, we'll discuss the social processes and logistics of how objects end up in museums and repositories as well as how to critically engage with that information. This includes histories of collections, documentation, and museum records. Students will learn what these things are and how to access that information, as well as what they can do with it.

Getting to Know the Collection (~15 min.)

We'll follow up with a transitional period between talking about collections in a theoretical sense and getting hands-on experience with them. We'll take everything we learned about how collections take shape and begin to see that emerge through the specific example of the Marshall University/Sunrise collection. At this point, the students will hear the history of the Sunrise Museum, how Marshall gained possession of the collection, and how the collection has been exhibited and used since. They will also receive a brief tour of the collections space, the objects themselves, and associated records.

Engaging with Objects (~25 min.)

In this section, students will begin to practice learning about an object using nothing but its material form. Once we've become familiar with the breadth of the collection, we'll pair each student with an object to work with, based on their own research interests. First, we'll discuss object handling and all other concerns related to proper object care. Then, we'll spend a few minutes examining objects (very carefully) under close supervision. We'll go around the table, sharing our observations and discussing what they might mean. This initial examination will be followed by a drawing exercise, which encourages "close looking." We'll reevaluate what we've learned, what hypotheses we've made, and what questions we still have.

Further Study (~20 min.)

Finally, we'll start to think about how documentation and other resources work together with object analysis to maximize our understanding of a collection. Each student will now get a look at the documentation/record associated with their object and think about how that information changes their understanding of what they've seen. They'll use the information they have to do a quick online search and see what more they're able to learn. We then reevaluate what we've learned, what hypotheses we've made, and what questions we still have. We'll wrap up with a discussion of how to move forward from this point, including a look at what other museums and repositories have relevant collections, what books are available in the library, what experts are present on campus, etc.

Flex Time: The final 30 minutes of the workshop (12:15-12:45) will be a period of continued research as well as an open house. Students can continue their object analysis, receive further research mentorship, and/or participate in broader discussion. This is also a great time for non-participants to stop by and hear about what was learned during the workshop.

Preparation: In advance of the workshop, I'll require access to the collections data in order to evaluate the collection's strengths and limitations and identify sensitive materials. Immediately before the workshop, it would be helpful to do a walkthrough of the collections space and available resources, and to do a quick review of the collection's history. Ideally, we would also have an attendance estimate ahead of time.