

## COMMUNITIES OF INQUIRY' AND 'BLENDED LEARNING' – TEACHING AN INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH TO CONSERVATION OF ETHNOGRAPHIC OBJECTS

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This presents the ERASMUS-project called “Ethics and Ethnographic Objects Conservation (EthCon)”<sup>1</sup> jointly organized by three institutions teaching conservation: HAWK University for Applied Sciences and Arts Hildesheim (Germany), Helsinki Metropolia University of Applied Sciences (Finland) and University of Amsterdam (The Netherlands).

EthCon is funded as an “Intensive Program” (IP) within the European Lifelong Learning Program over the period of three years. Each year a 2-week seminar brings together students, teachers and (museum) specialists working with ethnographic objects in various ways: like anthropologists, curators, collection managers, exhibition designers and natural scientists. Focus is laid on the ethical approach of heritage professionals towards objects and entire collections, in order to develop an interdisciplinary methodology for the preservation of ethnographic objects including preventive conservation during display, storage and possible travels as well as restoration aspects. Within this range also material analyses, risk assessment, art theft, museum security and illicit traffic of cultural goods are dealt with.

Ethnographic collections contain a large diversity of objects, made out of a lot of different materials: substances that are in many cases badly known, easily degradable and often formed to elaborated constructions. An even higher grade of complexity results from combining the viewpoint of material science with the cultural context the object is originating from: What was the original meaning or use of the object? What was the original appearance, the colour? How to detect possible religious and mystical meanings of objects and how to maintain them on display or during conservation treatment? This is only a selection of questions to face in decision making. Solitary answers can be provided by each profession, but an understanding of the aspects involved and a common language is needed to find the complete answers. Every profession must know at what stage of the decision making process to involve the others and what are the right questions to ask.



Figure1: Ensemble of ritual masks.

To meet this challenge the framework of a European seminar was chosen also to use the cultural and professional differences as a resource for learning and for generating effective responses in specific contexts. Moreover new ways of combining different methods of teaching and learning blended with the modern media were explored during the first seminar in Amsterdam in 2008. “The key to successful blended learning lies in:

- Selecting appropriate delivery methods for specific learning outcomes
- Effectively combining diverse learning events”<sup>2</sup>

An information and communication portal (“EthCon-Forum”)<sup>3</sup> has been set up prior to the event. This enables students as well as teachers (and specialists) to prepare themselves for the subject. Readings, relevant information from the museum partners and internet links were selected by the teachers and provided in the forum to ensure that the group would have the same level of knowledge on some topics and could use the same vocabulary (English) in the discussions. Also after the seminar information like students learning diaries and group photos were put on the EthCon website and students as well as teachers could still use the communication tools amongst each others.

For the case studies students were introduced to the learning method of “Communities of Inquiry”. The strength of the community lies in the merging of knowledge of all of the participants, instead of each individual trying to find out everything about the subject on his own.

What's new about this 'working together' is the systematic way in which all available knowledge is used to create a new comprehension in the subject. It also meant a different role for the teachers that were involved in this project. Instead of presenting themselves as experts, their role was to help the student-expert-groups to find out which knowledge was already available in their group, which knowledge was missing and how they could bridge the gap to find answers to their questions.



Figure 2: Discussion in front of displayed objects.

The students groups worked according to the following scheme of Community of Inquiry to:

- (1) Define the problem and the desired outcome
- (2) Make an inventory of the knowledge in the team
- (3) Analyze the strong and weak points of the team
- (4) Brainstorm to formulate questions, possible solutions and a plan of action
- (5) Gather relevant information, define which sources can be used
- (6) Investigate/research from different disciplines
- (7) Develop different concept solutions
- (8) Present and explain the results to other groups, 'try-out'
- (9) Choose one outcome based on evaluation of step 8

During the seminar in 2008 also 'conventional' teaching tools like lectures, discussions and students presentations preparing and resuming the subject and the group working were successfully applied. Although emphasis was laid on granting access to the museums libraries and to internet for the students for solving problems in their working group first, still the ICT part of the project could be extended and only first steps were taken to integrating 'Blended Learning' into the student's curriculum.

Major museums with ethnographical collections have agreed to co-operate in this project, because 'real-life' context is essential to the learning process of the students also. In the first year the Tropenmuseum,

the National Museum of Antiquities and the National museum of Ethnology in the Netherlands, offered expertise and objects from the collections for case studies. For the next IP in Germany the Roemer- und Pelizaeus Museum in Hildesheim and the University of Göttingen will be partners.



Figure 3: Demonstration of a handheld X-ray fluorescence analyser.

The expected outcome of this IP is a more systematic approach towards ethnographic collections. When this approach is fully developed and after gaining experience with the tools throughout the project (to be achieved in the coming two years) this shall result into a web based communication platform about this subject open to whole community in ethnography and an e-learning course.

## 5. References

1. IP242663/2/2/731/08.
2. R. J. Valdez, Blended Learning, Maximizing the Impact of an Integrated Solution, August 2001, [ftp://ftp-fc.sc.egov.usda.gov/NEDC/isd/blended\\_learning.pdf](ftp://ftp-fc.sc.egov.usda.gov/NEDC/isd/blended_learning.pdf).
3. [www.hornemann-institut.de/ethcon](http://www.hornemann-institut.de/ethcon)