Conversation is the Key:
A Short History of Smarthistory.org

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Abstract

Smarthistory.org is a proven, sustainable model for open educational resources in the Humanities. We discuss lessons learned during its agile development. Smarthistory.org is a free, creative-commons licensed, multi-media web-book designed as a dynamic enhancement or substitute for the traditional art history textbook. It uses conversation instead of the impersonal voice of the typical textbook in-order to reveal disagreement, emotion, and the experience of looking. The listener remains engaged with both the content and the interaction of the speakers. These conversations model close looking and a willingness to encounter and engage the unfamiliar. Smarthistory takes the inherent dialogic and multimedia nature of the web and uses it as a pedagogical method. This extendable Humanities framework uses an open-source content management system making Smarthistory inexpensive to create, and easy to manage and update. Its chronological timeline/chapter-based format integrates new contributions into a single historical framework, a structure applicable across the Humanities.

This essay examines the genesis, iterative growth, adoption, and uses of Smarthistory.org, a free, creative-commons licensed, multi-media web-book designed as a dynamic enhancement (or substitute) for the traditional art history textbook. Smarthistory's pages variously combine text, image, maps, links, and video, but our primary "tool" is perhaps the very oldest one—conversation. We use unscripted discussion to model for our listeners how to approach an unfamiliar and perhaps difficult work of art. In our conversations, our students can hear us take risks and learn from each other and this not only engages them, it models close looking, careful listening, and a degree of engagement with the object that we want our students to develop. With Smarthistory, we have tried to be entertaining and enlightening while eschewing an authoritative voice in favor of reliable but personal and opinionated experience. This makes us very different from the traditional textbook (which continues to be replicated in the online environment), and even from many OERs.

Smarthistory.org is a model for sustainable Open Educational Resources because it relies on volunteers, it exists outside of any educational institution, it runs on an open source content management system, and it has a minimal annual operating budget. In addition, it's structure is chronological and can easily be adapted to other Humanities-based disciplines (figure 1).

In 2009, Smarthistory.org won the Webby award for education, and the year before that, the gold award from AVICOM—the arm of the International Committee of Museums dedicated to multimedia. In 2009 Smarthistory was visited more than 450,000 times from 197 countries and territories, a 337-percent increase over the previous year. Preliminary figures suggest continued growth in 2010.

Smarthistory is widely used by teachers as an enhancement to the textbook, and is used by some as a subsitute for the textbook. Clearly, all textbooks—indeed all print publications—are at a crossroads. Like many other disciplines, the teaching and learning of art history stands to gain from new media. This is because digital media privileges the image, the very object of our discipline. Textbooks, with their seemingly singular, authoritative and impersonal voice, discipline-specific focus, and encyclopedic and chronological sweep, are directly at odds with many of the characteristics of new media, which favor numerous distinct voices, participation on the part of the reader, the remixing of content, personalized reading paths, and content that can be customized and revised immediately.

Our experience with Smarthistory.org suggests that art history instruction can significantly benefit from these and other qualities of new media. The relationship between text and image is a hallmark of the traditional art history textbook but has too often had the unfortunate effect of favoring text. Readers new to art history often look to the text to explain the image and look to the image only for what has been discussed in print. With Smarthistory, we have found that we can use audio and video to facilitate close, sustained looking at an object. We can also use new media to create an art history that is open to the viewers' emotion and experience, and one that models for our students how they can wrestle with unfamiliar works of art themselves.

Although the site was designed initially for college students, we have found that informal learners and high school teachers and their college-bound students also use the site. One instructor, who teaches an advanced placement art history course wrote to us that, "this is a really poor state...kids don't get to travel much and there were less than 200 ap [advance placement] art history tests taken in my state this year and I am all about exposing rural kids to the larger world."

She continued,
> *I can't tell you how much I love your site. I am sure you read this sort of love letter every day, but I just watched the Ecstasy of St. Theresa and then wandered over to Sant'Andrea and felt like I had found a way to explain Bernini so well and connect it to what my students do every day in their own work as emerging artists.*

In another recent email, a teacher, whose students may not expect to attend college wrote,
> *What a fantastic website! I am a new art teacher at a low income, Title I high school....I stumbled upon your website from another art teacher's website and I am absolutely hooked. Every project we do is structured around art history and your videos and virtual tours have become invaluable to me! My students have never left a 5 mile radius and may never be able to travel to see some of these incredible works of art. This generation of kids needs engaging via video and I am loving the entire site. I love your virtual tours because it exposes these poor students to a way of talking and looking at things as never before-we have talked lots about how to look at art and it helps them so much to hear you all talking intellectually about art work. They have never never been exposed to that-and with an 85 percent drop out rate they may never ever have the chance to take even art history 101.*

Smarthistory is helping teachers who are not specialists in art history find strategies to make the subject accessible and meaningful to students who might otherwise not have cultural resources available to them. And for college students, the site is fast becoming an attractive alternative to the commercial textbook whose short life cycle and $100+ price tag has increasingly become a barrier.

In the United States, federal and state initiatives to explore open textbooks have been prompted by rising prices, which can be as much as 72% of tuition at public institutions. Of course, these costs are borne by college students, but they are also indirectly subsidized by the government through student loan and tuition assistance programs. At the secondary level, textbook expenses are borne directly by local municipalities. The General Accounting Office (GAO) concluded that between December 1986 and 2004 college textbook costs increased at roughly twice the rate of inflation keeping pace with tuition increases at approximately six percent annually or 186% during this period (General Accounting Office, *College Textbooks: Enhanced Offerings Appear to Drive Recent Price Increases*, 2005). The 2007 *Study on the Affordability of College Textbooks* reported that textbook prices "represent a significant barrier to access and persistence" in education (United States Department of Education, *Study on the Affordability of College Textbooks*, 2007)

The rapid escalation in textbook costs was found to be the result of changes in the market—publishers indicated the need for additional support for the increasing numbers of part-time faculty, increasing investments in technology add-ons, and the increasing pace in which new editions are introduced. According to the General Accounting Office 2005 report, 10 to 20 years ago, publishers introduced revised editions every 4 to 5 years. This practice has been significantly accelerated so that new editions are now published on a 3 to 4 year cycle. Publishers cite the need for up-to-date content as a prime motivation, but its no accident that rapidly released editions efficiently inhibit the resale market. It is not just students who struggle with the short life-cycle of the textbook, since

teachers must revise their syllabi for each new edition. Given these stresses, new models are inevitable.

The development of open textbooks and other Online Educational Resources is being supported and studied in numerous public and privately financed initiatives. As of September 2010, the OER Commons linked to more than 4,000 open resources in the humanities at the secondary level and over 5,000 resources for post-secondary learners. Unfortunately, many of these Open Educational Resources are simply text and images that have been uploaded to the web as a PDF or in other static formats. We believe that in order for open textbooks to be successful, the nature of the web and the lessons of social networks must be recognized and built into the underlying design of the OER.

We began Smarthistory.org in 2005 (figure 2). It has grown in direct response to the needs of students, their professors, and informal learners. Soon after podcasting began, we purchased a $30 microphone, plugged it into an iPod and went to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York to create alternative museum audioguides—something that was more accessible and personal than the scripted monologues then offered. Essentially, we stood in front of a painting or sculpture and had a spontaneous conversation. We really had no plans beyond that. We posted our unscripted (though edited) audio conversations on a blog using the Blogger interface, and after we had completed half-a-dozen or so, created a map indicating the locations of the works that we had discussed. We're not sure if anyone ever downloaded these podcasts or listened to them in the museum. However, we quickly had success in an area we hadn't anticipated.

Soon after we started the blog, we added these illustrated audio files to the art history courses we were teaching online (the second half of the Western survey and Modern art). Student response was immediate and very positive. Our students loved the conversations and told us that our little experiment really helped them learn. So, in addition to focusing on more museum content, we began to record audio conversations about canonical monuments taught in the courses we were teaching. Soon, students in our face-to-face courses were also listening to our audios. Our next step was to create simple videos—assembling images in a Powerpoint, and then recording conversations with screen capture with programs like Camtasia. Sometimes we recorded conversations with a third or even a fourth colleague. After creating a few dozen videos and audios, we realized that it would be beneficial to put them into a chronological and stylistic framework, and so the first Smarthistory site was born (**Figure 3**). By this time we were using Wordpress and we were able to use its pages functionality with an out-of-the-box template, to organize our material chronologically and by style. Student feedback has been consistently and overwhelmingly positive.

Here's an example:
The videos help me a lot! I find it easier to retain the info[rmation] from the videos as opposed to reading several pages about the topic. It's definitely easier for me to focus on the visuals while listening to the descriptions at the same time. They are a definite reinforcement—

We also took a hard look at the photographs that illustrate art history texts, which tend to frame objects against black backgrounds, view altars straight on from unacknowledged scaffolding or in churches emptied of the visitors that bring the art to life. We use these images in Smarthistory, but wherever possible, we make a point to pair them with contextual images and now video that reveal the object as it is normally seen, surrounded by tourists, worshippers, and museum guards. For our

video on Picasso's *Still Life with Chair Caning*, we included photographs of oil cloth, chair caning and cafe tables which we think make the work more relevant to our students. We also link to Flickr images that our visitors submit. This combination of snapshots with more pristine monument images give our students valuable contextual information as well as a sense of the work of art as it is experienced in the early 21st century, as an object in their world.

Thanks to generous support from the Samuel H. Kress Foundation, we completely redesigned Smarthistory.org during the summer of 2008 to more closely align its content and user interface. (Figure 3) The new structure allows students to approach the narratives of art history using any of several embedded navigation paths. These include artists' name, historical period, style, theme, or even by using the prominent visual navigation that keeps the artwork front and center (this appears both on the home page and at the bottom of each object page). Smarthistory.org is among the few open educational resources that uses the capabilities of the web for non-linear, multimedia learning. We continue to reinvent Smarthistory.org, listening and responding to the needs of users and to new opportunities.

We have been fortunate to work with Dr. Elpida Makriyannis, a researcher from OLnet, an Open University and Carnegie Mellon University research initiative funded by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. Dr. Makriyannis is particularly interested in how OERs are used and late last year, she developed a survey that we linked to from the Smarthistory.org homepage. Her analysis of the results offered found that respondents consider the quality of the site's content to be quite strong. (84.8% rated the quality as excellent or very good). Respondents identified personal interest as the primary reason for using the site, this was followed by college instructors who use it in their teaching and then by students in college. Slightly more than half of the students who responded said they used it even though it was not assigned by their instructor, suggesting that the website offers something valuable beyond textbook readings (based on Google Analytics statistics, it is clear to us that the few college students who did respond represent a significantly larger number who did not). Smarthistory's interactivity and accessibility were cited as important strengths as was the use of conversation. When instructors were asked why they have not assigned Smarthistory, insufficient breadth of material was the most commonly cited issue. Though gaps still exist, we have made significant strides in addressing this concern by adding a substantial number of additional pages. The lack of non-Western material was also a specific concern.

Smarthistory currently treats fewer than 300 works of art and architecture though it is continuously growing. We are particularly aware that we have not addressed non-Western art and have sought to remedy this. To date, twenty-three curators, museum educators, and professors have contributed content. We have reached out to other art historians and museum professionals seeking additional material but because hiring, tenure and promotion committees are only starting to recognize the value of online publishing, those scholars who do contribute, do so primarily because they believe in the value of our project. It is important to note that, at least in the United States, authoring a textbook is often devalued and not seen on par with research. We are actively looking for partners and we are interested in sharing what we have developed with colleagues.

We know that Smarthistory is currently used as a substitute for the textbook, but Smarthistory needs more content. We believe that educating faculty about creative commons licensing, making contributions to OERs part of the tenure and promotion process, and making it easy for faculty to share the content they are developing for their courses (currently for the closed environment of the learning management system) is the key to the growth of Smarthistory and other OERs. In addition,

the chilling effect around copyright of images, especially for the discipline of art history, should not be underestimated. The model we have developed, of a repository that supports a freshman survey course, relies on voluntary contributions, and that runs so cheaply it requires no institutional investment makes Smarthistory a model for sustainable other Open Educational Resources in the humanities.
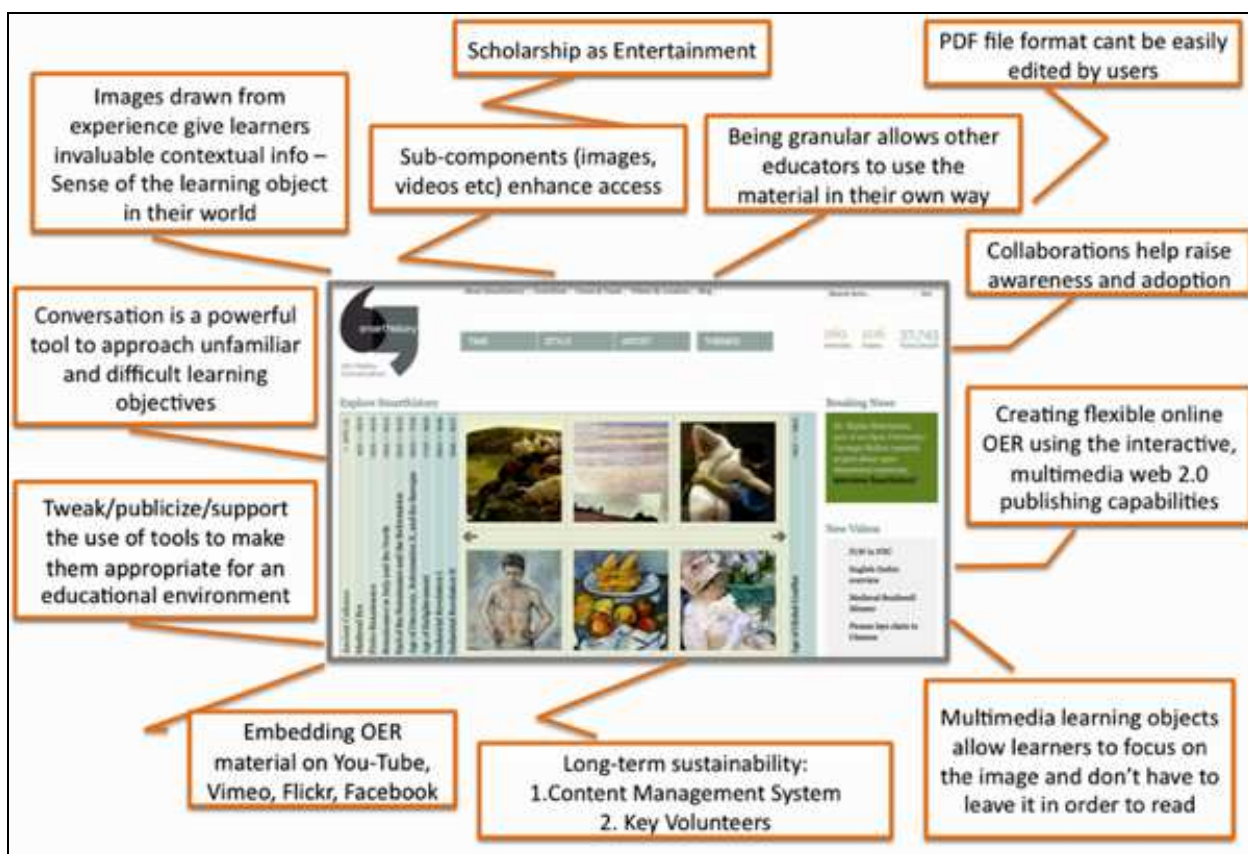
Figures

Images drawn from experience give learners invaluable contextual info – Sense of the learning object in their world

Scholarship as Entertainment

PDF file format cant be easily edited by users

Sub-components (images, videos etc) enhance access

Being granular allows other educators to use the material in their own way

Conversation is a powerful tool to approach unfamiliar and difficult learning objectives

Collaborations help raise awareness and adoption

Creating flexible online OER using the interactive, multimedia web 2.0 publishing capabilities

Tweak/publicize/support the use of tools to make them appropriate for an educational environment

Embedding OER material on You-Tube, Vimeo, Flickr, Facebook

Long-term sustainability:
1.Content Management System
2. Key Volunteers

Multimedia learning objects allow learners to focus on the image and don't have to leave it in order to read

Figure 1 - Dr. Elpida Makriyannis, Key points of the Smarthistory interview, Smarthistory.org OLnet Research Stream (source: http://olnet.org/node/92)

Figure 2 - Smarthistory.org home page

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Dr. Beth Harris is Director of DIgital Learning at a NYC museum. Before that, she was assistant professor of art history at the Fashion Institute of Technology, where she taught both online and in the classroom. She also directed FIT's large distance learning program. She has presented papers on instructional technology at conferences across the country (including the College Art Association, New Media Consortium, Educause, Merlot, etc.). Dr. Harris has authored essays on teaching with image technology including "The Slide Library: A Posthumous Assessment in the Service of Our Digital Future," *Teaching Art History with Technology: Case Studies* (2008).

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