

Research Article

Radical collaboration: Co-creating feminist online graduate courses through a university and museum partnership

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Introduction

Designing graduate curricula for the discerning 21st century student requires social, cultural and political academic sensitivity and accountability on the part of higher education professionals. Increasingly, universities are recognising the need for more fluid and dynamic approaches to designing multi-purpose higher education syllabi to respond to changing student expectations. As Friesen and Jacobsen (2021) assert, “professional educators are being challenged to create solutions to complex educational problems for a more diverse, inclusive, and equitable society” (p. 64). One approach to address this need, specifically in relation to gender justice, is the development of feminist curricula that center the voices and experiences of women across intersectional histories, in courses co-created using collaborative and non-hierarchical approaches.

This article analyses a collaborative curriculum design model developed by the University of Glasgow, UK, in partnership with the Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C., to co-create an online graduate course on *American Women's History at the Smithsonian* for Glasgow students. Areas of strength within the History subject area at Glasgow include Gender History, as well as Global History and

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American History. This course is one of many optional modules students can take as part of their graduate programme. The transnational university/museum partnership highlighted here drew on the established work of the American Women's History Initiative of the Smithsonian American Women's History Museum (SAWHM) and harnessed the team's collective practice expertise and scholarly knowledge for the co-creation of innovative, feminist, online teaching materials. The group followed a collaborative, non-hierarchical and inclusive approach to digital course design, termed 'Radical Collaboration.' This approach mirrored the values at the heart of the SAWHM and the Centre for Gender History at Glasgow, including a deeply-held commitment to the provision of feminist adult education as a cornerstone of the ongoing work to achieve gender justice.

Higher Education and Museum Partnerships at the University of Glasgow and Smithsonian Institution: A Review

The University of Glasgow has a history of fostering partnership collaborations in course design in particular in our Museum Studies, Information Studies and Museum Education graduate programs. These collaborations extend to community organizations, aligning with the University's civic role (Hulme et al., 2022) and providing practical experiences where theory meets real-world application for students. At Glasgow, we acknowledge the broader trend in Higher Education to enhance students' employability skills, as driven by demands from politicians, employers, and students themselves (e.g., Ashton & Noonan, 2013). Our collections-based programs incorporate work placements, practical training, and collaborative student research projects. These initiatives are backed by robust university/museum partnerships with entities such as Glasgow Women's Library, Glasgow Museums, and the University's Hunterian Museum.

However, we reject a simplistic, neoliberal view of employability that solely emphasizes workplace skills and competencies, as discussed by one of our authors elsewhere (Lloyd et al., 2023). Our approach introduces students not only to workplace practices like label writing and object research but also to the complex challenges and inequalities present in spaces like museums. For example, systems in museums from fulfilling their marginalised stories. By participatory nurture students' capacity doers" (Lloyd et al., experiences that directly uncomfortable subjects. Students have interacted with recent sector-leading projects and initiatives, such as Glasgow Women's Library Equality in Progress (2018), Curating Discomfort at The Hunterian (Yeaman & Greenwood, 2022), and the work on uncovering LGBTQ+ histories at the Burrell Collection (Bauld, 2021). These opportunities have been presented through visits, placements, and guest speakers, enabling students to delve into intersectional feminist and decolonial methods within the field and bridge the gap between theory and practice.

By providing practice-based, participatory opportunities, we aim to nurture students' capacity as "critical thinkers and doers" (Lloyd et al., 2023),

collections management might prevent students ambitions to uncover providing practice-based, opportunities, we aim to as "critical thinkers and 2023), with learning confront difficult or

The partnership between the University of Glasgow and educators at SAWHM has expanded the existing practice of community and heritage collaboration. It offers teaching staff the chance to learn from the research and public engagement strategies employed by

Smithsonian educators in addressing sensitive and significant topics, such as the application of gendered narratives to objects and incorporation of inclusive metadata to aid educational resource discovery. Additionally, it provides opportunities for reflection on activist practices that address social justice within the realm of Higher Education and the feelings of discomfort that educators may face when embracing new approaches or reflecting on their own positionality, privilege and deficits of knowledge on certain topics (Lloyd et al., 2023).

Radical Collaboration: A Model for Feminist Adult Education

The ‘Radical Collaboration’ model of curriculum development refers to an approach in which museum and higher education professionals work together to co-design a module, with intersectional feminism integral to both the co-creation methodology and the course pedagogy. By intersectional feminism here, we are referring to the critical framework, first conceptualised within Black Feminisms and feminisms of colour more broadly, and coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, in which gender as a modality of power is considered simultaneously in relation to other identity markers such as race, class and sexuality (Combahee River Collective, 1977; Crenshaw, 1989).

The context for the approach’s evolution was a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed between the University of Glasgow and the Smithsonian Institution in 2018, with the aim of catalysing research and teaching initiatives between the two institutions. The first collaboration was between Museum Education at Glasgow and the Smithsonian’s Office of Educational Technology, in which online teaching content was co-created for the MSc Museum Education programme. Two years later, in October 2020, Glasgow and the Smithsonian Institution collaborated again, this time on a MOOC (massively open online course). The course, *A Global History of Sex and Gender: Bodies and Power in the Modern World*, was launched via the FutureLearn platform, and produced by the Centre for Gender History at Glasgow. Gender history is a key specialism at Glasgow, with the Centre holding a long track record in successfully hosting international research and teaching collaborations. The Centre worked with Alex Crawford Mann, curator of prints and drawings at the American Art Museum, who contributed vital insight on the US painter Romaine Brooks, as part of an exposition on gender transgression in art.

During these collaborative projects, comparable initiatives in online learning were being developed at the Smithsonian Institution and, more specifically, by educators at SAWHM. Their objective is to meet the needs of learners at critical stages in their development and support educators with classroom resources and training. Target audiences include K-12 educators, middle and high school students, and college-aged and lifelong learners. Two MOOCs have been launched to amplify the voices of American women and girls through object-based learning. SAWHM collaborated with the Smithsonian Office of the Under Secretary for Education (OUSE) to adapt the edX MOOC *Conducting inclusive, interdisciplinary research to tell equitable stories*. The MOOC, hosted by the massive open online course provider edX, was originally developed with secondary students, researchers, and storytellers in mind. The course aims to teach learners to look at existing research with a critical eye and to think about how that research can tell a more equitable story.

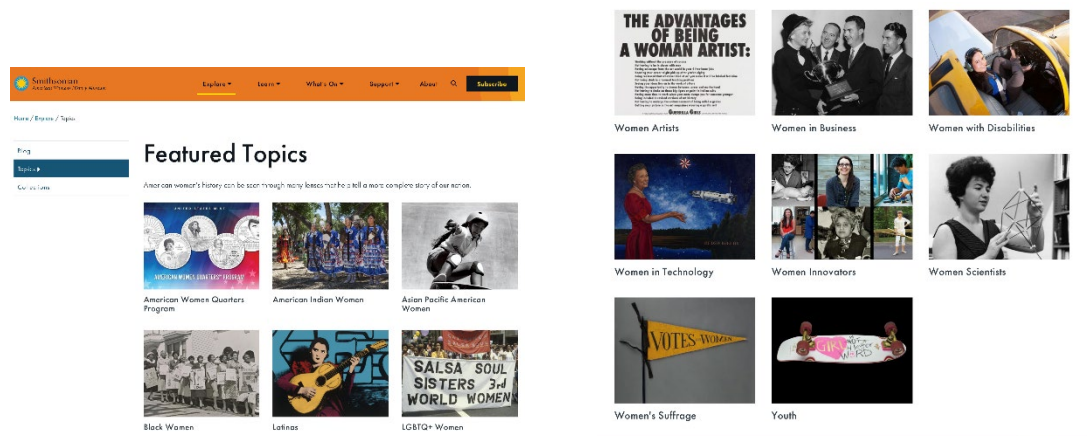
These online courses support the Smithsonian Institution's digital-first mission by featuring collections beyond physical museum spaces and traditional learning environments.

In summer 2023, a modified version of the course was delivered to the SAWHM summer internship cohort. Plans are underway to relaunch the course in March 2024. A goal of these efforts is to spread the diverse and often untold stories of important contributions by American women and girls through a critical observation of historical objects. Additionally, these online courses support the Smithsonian Institution's digital-first mission by featuring collections beyond physical museum spaces and traditional learning environments. Finally, these

courses demonstrate culturally responsive teaching and learning strategies while encouraging 21st century literacy skills.

In January 2020, these collaborative online initiatives converged in a Women's History roundtable, celebrating the renewal of the Smithsonian Institution/University of Glasgow MoU. Plans were in motion at the Centre for Gender History to launch an online MSc Global Gender History, targeting international learners with pre-existing work and caring responsibilities. This program focused on gender, queer, and decolonization efforts in public history. Glasgow colleagues in Gender History (Tanya Cheadle) and Museum Studies (Katherine Lloyd) were already collaborating on course material development for a core course. An interdisciplinary team formed, including SAWHM educationists (Ashleigh Coren, Chanelle Pickens) and Glasgow researchers with expertise in Gender History (Cheadle, Blanche Plaquevent, Peggy Brunache), US History (Daniel Scroop), Museum Studies (Lloyd), and Museum Education (Margaret McColl). They committed to co-design a 20-credit module on modern American women's history for the new online program. This module employed a digital object-based learning approach, informed by wider decolonization efforts, to explore currently relevant topics within intersectional feminist activism.

Work began in earnest in January 2022. Initial meetings, held monthly and online, focused on establishing the pedagogical and intellectual parameters of the course. The Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs) were drafted, the periodisation broadly defined (ca.1875-2010) and three themes identified of Sex, Intimacy, and the Body; Paid Work; and Family, Care and the Home, with a fourth theme, Activism, included as a discrete topic for study with a recognition that it would also act as an analytical lens throughout the course. These themes built on the existing thematic approaches of the SAWHM's online learning resources (Figures 1 & 2) and were chosen specifically to facilitate connections by students between contemporary and historical issues, while also providing the course with coherence and focus. It was proposed that each theme would take a fortnight to complete, providing vital flexibility for online learners.



Figures 1 & 2: Screenshots from the SAWHM's online learning resources

A methodology then evolved in which University of Glasgow researchers suggested topics within each theme which had attracted recent and substantive scholarship, while SAWHM educationalists used the Smithsonian Institution's collections to source relevant objects. Assessments drew on models commonly used on History and Museum Studies or Museum Education graduate courses and included museum labels, as well as public history talks, and critical analyses. Peer review was built into the design, with students required to post their assessments to the course discussion forum to receive constructive, critical feedback before submission. The final phase involved selecting and interpreting Smithsonian Institution objects, exploring their complex relationship with gendered experiences in American women's history across various categories. The course designers also ensured that they structured the course materials to maximize both individual and collaborative learning in an asynchronous format, using Moodle, the University of Glasgow's online learning environment.

Pre-Conditions, Advantages and Challenges of the Approach

The approach outlined above requires certain conditions to be in place. It needs sufficient time for collaborative working practices to consolidate and course materials to be developed. Here, the course took 18 months to bring to fruition. Furthermore, clear synergies need to be apparent in the two partners' ethos and objectives. In this instance, these included a commitment to recovering and foregrounding historic women's voices and experiences, to fostering critical inquiry on the operation of intersecting modalities of power and their impact historically on women's lives, and to considering the category of 'woman' contextually and inclusively, encompassing queer, trans, disabled and racially minorized lives.

With these conditions in place, we found that the approach held numerous advantages. It allowed for the development of a genuinely interdisciplinary approach, with deep and regular discussions on the relative benefits and limitations of methodologies traditionally used within individual disciplines, ultimately fostering pedagogical innovation. By working collaboratively, the pool of collective research expertise was significantly expanded,

By working collaboratively, the pool of collective research expertise was significantly expanded, promoting more diversity and representation

promoting more diversity and representation in the themes and topics covered by the course. Partnership with the Smithsonian Institution brought privileged access to – and expertise on – a wealth of primary sources, including items not currently on display in Smithsonian museums.

A significant benefit to Smithsonian staff was the uncovering of new objects for use in future projects. The Smithsonian Institution includes 20 museums and galleries and the National Zoological Park, and its collections consist of approximately 155 million objects/specimens. Of these, nearly 5.5 million have been digitized and are easily searchable online (<https://www.si.edu/collections>). Those relevant to the histories of American women and girls can be found across the institution's collections.

With time to survey the collections within the framework of the course curriculum, SAWHM educationists identified compelling objects, including, for example, a chest binder worn by professional skateboarder Leo Baker (Figure 3). Though this object is not currently on view in the National Museum of American History, and will not be used in the University of Glasgow course, digitized images and a 3D model allow learners to observe the chest binder (https://www.si.edu/object/chest-binder-worn-professional-skateboarder-leo-baker:nmah_1914660). With these digital resources, educators gain unique opportunities to facilitate discussions around Baker's experiences as a queer professional athlete and LGBTQ+ experiences, more generally, in sports.



Figure 3: Chest binder worn by professional skateboarder Leo Baker, National Museum of American History (Smithsonian Institution)

Finally, the project established successful working practices for a team which is already cooperating on a new project to co-design COIL (Collaborative Online International Learning) resources for use across numerous master's programs at the University of Glasgow using Smithsonian Institution collections.

This collaborative project has posed and continues to pose several challenges. First, the collaborative dimension has proved demanding, from both a practical and intellectual point of view. Although working together has precluded the over-burdening of one individual, coordinating people is time-consuming, all the more so because of the difficulty of aligning people from different backgrounds and disciplines. As conventions differ between the disciplines of History and Museology (the latter referring to the critical analysis of museums, taught in Museum Studies and Museum Education courses), navigating these differences has been challenging. Difficulties arose particularly around the nature of assessments, as museological courses often utilise practice-based assessments, such as display label writing, whereas History courses tend to be evaluated by essays.

Moreover, in our approach to the theme of American women, contrasting visions and perspectives could be difficult to combine. The Smithsonian collections and existing resources were often centred on individual historical figures, which poses methodological questions. Gender historians in the team reflected on how to navigate the risk of offering a 'heroic' narrative focused on exceptional women and the progress of rights within an anti-racist pedagogy. For example, there were discussions around the inclusion of feminists such as Susan B Anthony (Figure 4), who is celebrated for her suffrage activism but employed tactics that actively suppressed the rights of Black women in the campaign to gain women's right to vote. Teaching staff were cautious about student perceptions of such intersectional approaches, which, while highlighting the diversity of women's experiences, have the potential to demonise historical actors and could be perceived by learners as furthering gender divisions. This raised interesting questions regarding the balance between activist approaches that amplify the stories of women commonly found in public programmes and the need to maintain critical distance, an issue SAWHM are also exploring. University courses can offer spaces for learners' meaningful engagement with these issues, which can be uncomfortable to discuss, in nuanced and respectful ways. Here, a feminist approach to adult education is vital, as it encourages learners and teachers to sit with this discomfort, allowing rather than denying discordant views. This is conceptualised as part of an intentional process in which individual assumptions, values and beliefs are critiqued and transformation in understanding can occur, while teachers remain necessarily alert to the power imbalances within and beyond the classroom, and how 'discomfort' will be felt differently, by different students, in response to the course's varied objects and topics.



Figure 4: Photograph of Susan B. Anthony, National Portrait Gallery (Smithsonian Institutions)

Additionally, the sheer number of objects in the Smithsonian's collections posed a challenge for course designers. SAWHM educationists originally posed approximately 75 objects across the course's identified themes for consideration. These ranged from portraits of African American civil rights activist and advocate Rev. Dr. Pauli Murray to photographs of attendees at Harlem's Evisu Ball, a queer masquerade, to menstrual pads used by girls of the Quileute people of western Washington state. In some cases, it was decided to select objects representative of individuals as a means to facilitate more nuanced conversations. An example of this is the use of a portrait of labor organizer, suffragist, and feminist Leonora O'Reilly during the course module on Paid Work (Figure 5). While this object centers only one voice, it will be used as a starting point to discuss not only the impact of the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire (which claimed the lives of 123 female garment workers), but also the broader role of women in labor organization, and the contemporary role of women in consumerism and goods production.



Figure 5: Pencil drawing by Wallace Morgan of Leonora O'Reilly, National Portrait Gallery (Smithsonian Institution)

Finally, the intersectional feminist approach to course design challenged established practice in the subject area and was at times uncomfortable for the Historians on the team: university courses in History are usually developed from an intellectual framing (time period, methodology, scope) but in this case, working back from the collections of the Smithsonian meant ascertaining first what was available and only then defining the intellectual framework. It meant that many resources identified by the Smithsonian collaborators have ended up not being used (at least for the first iteration of the course). It also meant that the scope of the course remained unspecified for part of the project, which could be disorientating for lecturers used to designing courses the other way around. Starting from the Smithsonian collections provided many opportunities for diverse stories to be told, but the gaps in the collection also created obstacles when the team identified themes that were difficult to address through the objects available, a challenge also faced in museum practice.

American Women's History at the Smithsonian will launch in September 2023. Its first iteration will be offered online only, and its asynchronous delivery aims to support students needing to self-pace their learning and access resources at times that are most suitable to their schedules. During the 11 weeks of the course, students will study the historiography on American women's history through a critical engagement of visual imagery and/or harmonics of Smithsonian objects (paintings; music; clothing, photographs, etc) grounded across several themes underpinned by interdisciplinary theories of activism for social change. Critical engagement with objects for analysis and discussion question(s) for which students will provide opinions and responses to fellow learners in an online forum, managed by the convenor. There is the possibility that some topics may be deemed controversial or even

Critical engagement with the weekly themes and set of objects for analysis and comparison are guided by discussion question(s) for which students will provide opinions and responses to fellow learners in an online forum, managed by the convenor.

intersectional and methodologies of and gender equity. the weekly themes and set comparison are guided by which students will responses to fellow forum, managed by the possibility that some controversial or even

distressing by some. For example, a decorative plate featuring the words “KKK God Give Us Women” (see Figure 6) will be used to facilitate a discussion on the relationship between white women and white supremacy. In-keeping with pedagogical broader approaches of both University of Glasgow and SAWHM outlined above, questions relating to the students’ (dis)comfort will also be provided from the outset of the semester and monitored with immediate response to any negative feedback. While required readings are provided to contextualise the historical relevance of the objects, students are encouraged to volunteer additional reading materials that fosters a more inclusive and autonomous learning environment. Feedback will be sought from students during and at the end of the course, and modifications made in response to their comments and experience.



Figure 6: Decorative Ku Klux Klan plate, National Museum of African American History and Culture, Smithsonian Institution

Conclusions

We found the model of ‘radical collaboration’, which evolved during the co-creation of the graduate module *American Women’s History at the Smithsonian*, to constitute an effective and stimulating way of developing online course curricula. We believe it has the potential to be applied to other institutional and transnational contexts, in the co-creation of courses which serve a range of Higher Education degree programs. For it to be successful however, we suggest several conditions need to be present. Close synergies in ethos and objectives between the two partners is essential, in this case a commitment to producing online, feminist teaching materials which speak to the concerns of diverse, international learners. An established partnership between the two institutions, in the form of an MoU or similar agreement, can provide important, centrally organized fora and resources for networking and sharing ideas. Finally, the approach takes time, along with a team committed to the project, and comfortable with navigating a non-hierarchical and

multidisciplinary way of working. With these conditions met however, we believe the approach can offer a powerful way for museums and universities to work collaboratively and generatively to teach history through a feminist lens, conceptualizing course aims and objectives which place achieving social justice alongside historical understanding and heritage sector skills.

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