

## Mystic E-port Digital Classroom Summative Evaluation

### OF AN IMLS FUNDED NATIONAL LEADERSHIP GRANT

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**Prepared for:** **Mystic Seaport**  
75 Greemanville Avenue  
Mystic, CT 06355

**Prepared by:** John Fraser, PhD AIA & Karen Plemons, MS Ed.

**Correspondence:** John Fraser [jfraser@newknowledge.org](mailto:jfraser@newknowledge.org)

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A two stage summative evaluation was conducted following the launch of the Mystic Seaport for Educators website, the final output resulting from the IMLS National Leadership grant entitled Mystic E-Port Digital Classroom project. The results of four focus groups, conducted in two phases, found consistent results suggesting that the project was successful at achieving all four goals as outlined in the original grant proposal.

The project overcame a deficit in stakeholder input related to its digitization priorities and web access strategies for learners. Specifically, the project engaged a wide range of teachers, community families and staff to create a new resource that expands the reach of the collections in ways that are perceived as useful and stakeholder developed.

The project overcame a lack of community/audience input into the institution's strategic planning for educational tools and resources. Specifically, the teachers and families involved in co-creating the assets directly shaped the final outcomes in ways that were perceived as practical, useful and exemplary for the field of online learning resources.

The project redefined partnerships with local schools based on 21<sup>st</sup> century models of museum community engagement. The efforts to invest in a co-creation strategy redressed an institutional deficit in perceived support for education programs and produced results that teachers reported were successful in scaffolding student's abilities to problem solve, think critically, and to creatively apply historical information to contemporary experience.

The project overcame challenges created by the fiscal crisis in public finance that limited both income and opportunity related to field trips and support for live programs by creating new avenues to access the collections. The results succeeded in repositioning Mystic Seaport as a community leader that supports dialogue around issues of equity, access and expanded the institution's ability to reach audiences that are unable to physically visit the institution. Of interest in this last finding was the degree to which the community now feels more closely tied to the Mystic Seaport and its mission as a leading thinker in educational material production and the perception that the institution is at the forefront of web resource development.

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## Overview of the Evaluation

Mystic Seaport aims to inspire an enduring understanding of the relationship of America to the Sea through exploring the history of the American maritime experience in Mystic, CT. The Museum's core values are knowledge, stewardship, authenticity, inspiration and community. With a vision that is firmly grounded in these core values, the institution strives to influence how new generations engage with our nation's past, present and future.

Prior to the start of the Mystic E-Port Digital Classroom project, results of an internal access assessment determined that Mystic Seaport's history collections were not reaching the intended audiences. To ensure that the collections are more accessible in order to advance the institution's mission, the study prioritized measures for addressing four deficits:

1. Overcome a deficit in stakeholder input related to its digitization priorities and web access strategies for learners;
2. Overcome a lack of community/audience input into the institution's strategic planning for educational tools and resources;
3. Re-define partnerships with local schools based on 21<sup>st</sup> century models of museum-community engagement through exploring co-creation or co-delivery strategies, and redress the deficit in perceived support for education programs that focus on increasing skills at problem solving, critical thinking, or creative application of historical information to contemporary challenges; and
4. Overcome challenges created by the fiscal crisis in education and public finance that had limited both income and opportunity related to field trips and support for live programs, and restore access in ways that would reposition Mystic Seaport as a community leader that can support dialogue around issues of equity, access and democracy, concepts central to its mission.

To address these issues, Mystic Seaport secured IMLS Congressionally-directed funds to support a research and implementation program that engaged educators and community leaders in a process of redefining how access to resources and the institution could be better aligned with 21<sup>st</sup> Century economic realities. The project sought to develop a new infrastructure and delivery model that would be sustainable beyond the life of the grant. Mystic Seaport's launch of the new delivery platform and community engagement strategy is the subject of this summative evaluation.

*Who is the intended audience and how the project will serve this audience.*

This project focuses on two core audiences who help shape the community experience with Mystic Seaport: teachers in the formal education system and parents whose children are currently enrolled in those programs. It recognizes that teachers are informal learners who are members of the community and whose social networks extend to their professional lives. It also recognizes the shift in thinking that classrooms are not the only place where families and children develop skills for lifelong learning. By working with these two core audiences, Mystic Seaport would co-create classroom and out-of-school family programs that digitally link MS assets to community and place-based learning opportunities.

Redevelopment of the Mystic Seaport web resources for educators was included in the planning phase of the Museum's initiative to re-envision how access to museum resources is provided and how educational content is made relevant to contemporary audiences. It also planned to develop a new community engagement strategy that would serve as a replicable model for the museum community, demonstrating how resources could be deployed to support best practices in student learning and achievement. The strategy included the development of fiscally sound, operationally feasible, and sustainable infrastructure and delivery mechanisms for museum content

The audiences for the project were the core communities—schools, families and social groups—in the region that support, promote or use museums and libraries as resources for lifelong learning and achievement. The project proposed a paradigm shift toward thinking about opportunities for children to develop skills for lifelong learning beyond the classrooms. Similarly, teachers and parents were approached both as informal learners in the community, with social networks linked to their professional lives, and as professionals experienced in the appropriation and contextualization of resources to serve their needs in formal education.

The Institute for Learning Innovation (ILI) worked with the core communities to co-create classroom and out-of-school family programs, integrating Museum digital offerings with community and place-based learning opportunities. During the front-end research phase, researchers and the management team assessed attitudes and beliefs about existing Museum resources, contemporary concerns about America's future in relation to the sea, and their priorities concerning individual lifelong learners in society. With teachers, an additional focus was on understanding how they

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selected and adapted curriculum and their participation in teachers' forums and social networks. Using these data, the management team recruited participants for two core community social groups and two external advisory councils to help develop the new models for engagement and to serve as founding members of a Mystic Seaport learning network. These leaders were selected because they represent innovators and early adopters of technology, are considered pioneers by their peers, and have the social networks to attract diverse voices to the creation of a new learning model.

Based on the findings from the front-end research phase, the Museum chose to concentrate their efforts on working with teachers to develop online resources for classroom teachers and home school families. Teachers were selected to work with Mystic Seaport staff on developing online resources related to objects in the Museum's collection. Near the completion of the Online Interactive Artifact Projects, New Knowledge Organization Ltd. (NewKnowledge) conducted focus groups with participating teachers and staff involved with the projects to understand the impacts on them and the potential uses and impacts for the process and tools created.

At the completion of the project, teachers who had not participated were invited to join a focus group to discuss the potential uses and benefits of the web assets to their teaching practices.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Data Collection**

Researchers from NewKnowledge conducted four 90-minute focus group discussions with teachers from Mystic, Connecticut at Mystic Seaport Museum and an additional focus group with Mystic Seaport staff in fall 2012. The second round of the two sets of focus groups was conducted one year later in fall 2013 after the summer launch of the final website. The first focus groups with teacher/co-creators were conducted at the conclusion of the development phase of the project prior to final production of the new online resource tools. The second round represented the period following the final website build-out. Quotations, based on audiotapes, transcripts, and researcher's written notes, are included in the discussion of results.

Qualitative focus groups were deemed especially relevant to the early phase given that teacher/staff group dynamics were considered potentially valuable sources of information in and of themselves (Kitzinger, 1995). A qualitative phenomenological approach was employed in order to gain an understanding of the unique experiences and perspectives of staff members and teachers involved in developing the Interactive Artifact Project. *Guided existential reflection as a phenomenological research tradition* (Van Manen, 2002) has the potential to unearth hidden assumptions and values as it closely examines phenomena from the individual perspective, and so is well suited to the present research goals.

We were able to leverage the flexibility of the socially dynamic group process to pursue unexpected avenues of research. It proved useful in facilitating participants' reflection on and exploration of the topics of prime relevance to them, and in collectively unearthing questions and topics that were not included in the researcher's predetermined protocol. Appendix A contains the focus group protocol and the questions that were asked of each focus group.

## PARTICIPANTS

Participants in this study included select teachers and staff involved with the media tool production for Mystic Seaport and an additional panel of potential users chosen by the project teachers for the final wave of evaluations. During the first phase, participants were involved in creating the Interactive Artifact Project (IAR), either through developing Interactive Artifacts as participating teachers, or through working with the teachers in their capacity as museum staff. During the second wave, teachers were either members of the co-creation team in the first focus group or potential users in the second. During the second wave, the term IAR had ceased to be used.

- Teachers/Co-creators
  - High school history
  - Middle school - 19th century history
  - High school history
  - Director of music, and senior history
  - High school art
- Staff Members
  - VP for collections and library director
  - Collections manager
  - Collections registrar
  - Creative services producer in film
  - AV assistant
- Teachers/Future users
  - High school history
  - Middle school - 19th century history
  - High school history
  - Director of music, and senior history
  - High school art

## ANALYSIS

Analysis of the data from the focus groups followed a procedure similar to that of qualitative data from other sources. At the most basic level, the conversation generated during each focus group was examined for thematic content. General themes that were evident are described, with particular distinction made between individual perspectives that may contrast with the group consensus. Close attention was also paid to outlying views expressed by the participants, even when they surfaced themes that were not part of the focus group protocol. The key to leveraging focus group data is to examine the group dynamics that are revealed during the conversation. As Kitzinger (1995, p.302) describes:

*In coding the script of a group discussion, it is worth using special categories for certain types of narrative, such as jokes and anecdotes, and types of interaction, such as "questions," "deferring to the opinion of others," "censorship," or "changes of mind."*

The above was achieved by focusing on how the group discussion depicted a story that the researcher attempted to unearth through a collaborative, interactive process. Thus, the emerging conversation was the point of interest, rather than isolated comments that were potentially difficult to interpret without a contextual grounding.

Following the first focus groups, Mystic Seaport's web development team invested in a second round of remedial upgrades to the website, supplanting Interactive Artifacts (IARs) with a range of media support tools co-created with teachers. In the following report, the quotes that use the IAR terminology represent discussions that occurred in the first wave of summative evaluation.

## Results

### Products

#### Use of IAR's/Media Resources in Classrooms

In the initial discussion forums, two participants said that they weren't sure if and how to incorporate IARs into their class. Another said that the importance of the artifacts *makes it real for the kids*. A third said that they would be able to make a lot of use of the program, that one course s(he) teaches is AP U.S. History, and that teaching the use of primary documents will be very helpful in that course.

The art teacher said that it would enrich the conversations in her classroom, that she looked forward to talking about her experiences over the summer, and telling her students that, like them, she ... *found (her)self reading books during the summer, I would read for pleasure... it made me want to go to the library with my students*. This teacher said *the best I can teach is the excitement... I would be more interested in sharing with my colleagues*. Other participants emphasized that the program will help them underscore the importance of learning as *a process*, the importance of being *inquisitive* as a learner, helping them to enjoy and be excited about learning.



Figure 1. Website landing page.

During the second wave of focus groups, this question led to slightly different reasoning, most likely as a result of the reconstruction of the web portal to focus more explicitly on teachers' utility and functional relationships with teaching objectives that were embedded in the interface.

For both the teachers who participated and those who were likely users, the restructured content was considered particularly valuable. Most felt the resources were thought provoking, suitably structured and clearly identified. They felt the five categories used to describe assets on the site aligned well with their teaching goals, and were most likely to be useful to their peers. One teacher described the tools as general enough for utility but specific enough that they would allow teachers to adapt these assets for their classroom pending grade and type of class. They also felt that the question structure that accompanied the assets was very valuable.

These teachers felt that adapting resources was a typical strategy that most teachers expected to undertake when they develop their lesson plans and activity recommendations.

*As a high school history teacher, I thought that a lot of the information could be useful for my own classroom with my students for research, especially the living documents and the artifact articles.*

Most teachers felt that the media tools were well structured to provoke youth thinking and to pursue self-directed inquiry. The teachers felt that the breadth and depth of resources was more than they could consume in a quick study, but most of the resources seemed broadly applicable. A few noted that despite the advance notice for the focus group, most had only skimmed the material lightly, as they would any resource. They suggested that most teachers would likely need a long time to become familiar with the all of the tools and resources, likely sourcing a few to start and then taking time to explore over months as they identify curriculum that might benefit from a resource or two.

For most teachers, the primary value was tied to the ability for students to access authentic resources. For the potential users, the first assessment of the website was directed toward understanding the breadth and depth of the resources on the website.

One teacher not involved in the website development described the relevance of the assets for a course project. She claimed that youth became engaged by one of the tools, a scrimshaw image, developed a project based on the image, visited the Seaport and took their own pictures, and then created a project report on that tool. This flexible link between the real experience of an object and the preparation for the visit suggested that the tools were useful in setting the tone for visits and made the museum experience particularly directed toward supporting learning.



Figure 2. Whale bone stamp from the Artifact Articles

In the final phase of this evaluation, the last two focus groups were asked to consider the value of the content on each of the main sections of the website. The responses generally reflected the summary findings noted above, but drew attention to specific issues that might aid Mystic Seaport as it builds this new online tool in the coming years.

#### Artifact articles

The artifact articles appeared to represent a highly valued tool for teachers because the structure and form was obvious and easily modified for their purposes in the classroom. For those who had not participated in the design of the website, the general categorization of objects was considered particularly useful for helping students build skills with research.

*...it's not like you're giving them new directions every time. It's kinda like once you teach them how to do the first couple times, \_\_\_\_\_ they could kinda take it and go with the next one, which I thought was be strong skill building for them.*

Most teachers agreed that this was the first place they gravitated to when exploring the site, and most felt that the summary content was scaled to their needs and goals. All participants, both participants and those invited to view the site, found the content easy to navigate and could imagine how to apply across the entire curriculum, from visual and language arts to history and science.

When pushed by the evaluator to criticize the site for deficiencies, most teachers felt that the information for teachers was useful but tended to be harder to locate for those new to the site. They recommended segregating the ties to the curriculum and possible strategies for using the tool because the extended amount of text did not match their web browsing behaviors. Most teachers felt that the teacher information needed a more prominent highlighted section.

Most participants also felt that the website would benefit from a “how to” user introduction video or pop-up tools for new users to help them learn the layers of information available on the site.

In general, these teachers felt that the detailed information, the writing level was appropriate to teachers and high school students, and that the supplementary materials related to the artifacts was a new innovation they had not seen on other websites. They felt these assets helped distinguish this website from other more “curator-driven” websites that tended to not suit their needs.

In the second set of focus groups, the teachers who participated in the program felt that the archival data related to accession and item identifiers were too prominently placed, while those who were new to the site claimed this data was “*easy to ignore.*” Most felt it was a museum priority to have this information and recognized that it was not relevant to their needs as teachers.

Other comments in the transcripts offer suggested refinements that might increase usability, but did not change the general perception that these tools were uniquely suited to the needs of a classroom teacher.

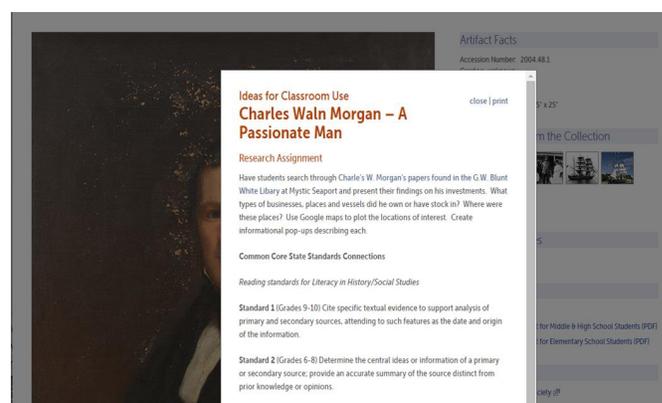


Figure 3. Artifact Article with *Ideas for Classroom* revealed.

Living documents

The living documents were considered an important highlight of the collection. All teachers affirmed that access to authentic sources were essential learning tools for contemporary teachers. They felt that these assets were a direct value of online collections that they tied to their teaching goals.

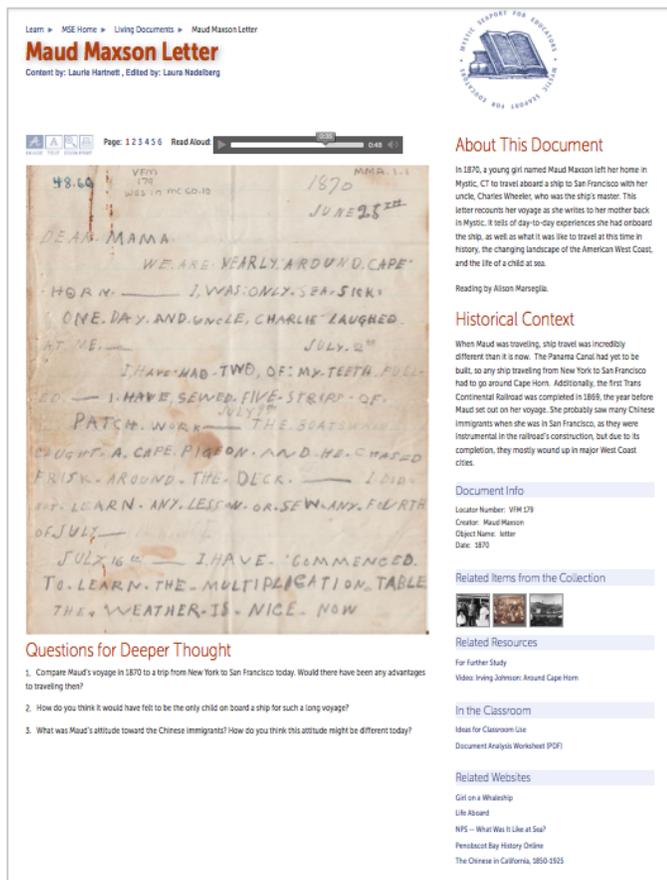


Figure 4. Living document page.

The discussion of the assets related to the Maud Maxson journal demonstrated that the value was not solely linked to the ability to see the asset, but more importantly, linked to all of the assets that were developed to help situate the letter in history. For teachers in younger grades, the audio recording provided access for students unfamiliar with reading documents, the historical context helped other teachers inspire their students to try to synthesize the work in their own life context, and the adventure of a girl on a ship was

perceived as provocative for students who have difficulty imagining the world without digital connectivity.

In general, the teachers noted that there were not a great number of assets, but they tended to believe that quality was more important than quantity because teachers tend to use only a few resources to advance a larger agenda.

Commentary suggested that identifying authentic assets remains a challenge for teachers, and the assets provided by Mystic Seaport appear to redress that deficit.

Active Maps

The active maps section of the website depicts over three years of a voyage that charts a path from the Atlantic to the Pacific, links dates to the location on the map and journal entries, and situates the voyage on a global scale. The map allows the user to select dates and to triangulate the dates back to other assets in the online collection.

Teachers in these focus groups were very enthusiastic about this asset. The described it as revolutionary. One teacher felt that at least three classes would benefit directly from the map and s/he could derive a variety of curriculum opportunities that use the tool directly. Beyond describing the map as cool, most teachers agreed that the map was particularly suited to the developmental interests of middle school youth as they situate themselves in the world.

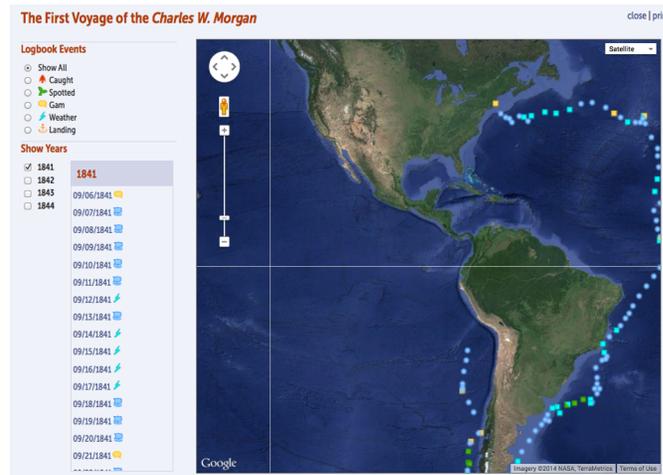


Figure 5, Interactive Map

Unfortunately, the teachers who were not part of the project development did not spend time exploring the map in any depth. As they were presented with the map functionalities, most were

enthusiastic, but it appeared from this discussion that the orientation tools may not be adequate to help teachers new to the site to see the value that other teachers find once they have familiarity with the tool.

### Resource Sets

The resource sets were seen as particularly relevant to the high school teachers because they both integrate material and require synthesis by the learner and the teacher. Most teachers felt that these resources were more relevant than curricula because it allowed them to adapt the resources to their needs.

*Right there, does that take you to the original – yeah. That's the cool stuff I like. The kind of resource documents, which is a huge thing that people – that teachers are looking for high school-level history. It's almost every assignment \_\_\_\_ research document and so I'm always working with kids on what they are and how to find them.*

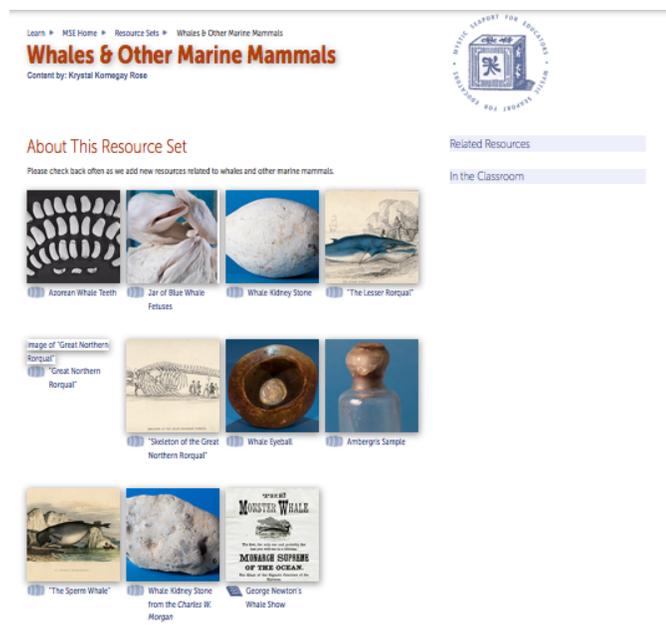


Figure 6, Sample of a Resource Set Page

Teachers were very supportive of the resource sets created on the website. They felt that the collection was suitably provocative and open-ended to suit the needs of many teachers working in different subjects. Most felt that these resources were adaptable to their unique settings.

One part of the discussion illustrated clearly that teachers felt the resource sets were useful as direct sources of inspiration and instruction for their students:

*Teacher 2: I guess I want to use these as a jumping off point... we do a lot of in high school writing by asking questions. These can be documents, but they don't actually have to be documents. They're using ...it as evidence to kind of prove a point or to tell a story\_\_.*

*Moderator: So are you going to let them loose on the website and just say, "Go to the Mystic Seaport educators website –"*

*Teacher 2: I have.*

*Moderator: You've done that?*

*Teacher 2: Yes, oh, yeah. They love it.*

*Teacher 2: Yeah, no, my juniors, I definitely let them do that.*

*Moderator: You just say, "Go find something"?*

*Teacher 2: Yeah. Or they're using it as research. It works well, I would say that one of the things that I've discovered is that it is harder for them, even as juniors, to be able to find the sources we used, believe it or not. They just didn't think to click on related resources that –*

*Teacher 2: I learned that today, actually.*

*Teacher 3: I'm curious that juniors, I would think they would be so far advanced.*

*Teacher 2: Yeah, I think they want the information right there. When I said to one of them, "Go to the Resource Sets page," and I talked – 'cause it was my article, and I knew about it – and, "Go to the resources, and use – there's one there that will help you as you look up <pirate whaling>," and he was like, "Well, where are your resources?" And I said, "Well – <take a look>"*

*Moderator: Now do you think that was a typical student? Was that a student that needed more scaffolding than usual?*

*Teacher 2: I think he might have been a little bit lazy, but I also think we might be better served making – sort of putting it out there a little bit more for them, to make it a little more obvious to them.*

*Teacher 3: Just a little more guided in a sense.*

*Teacher 2: Yeah.*

*Teacher 3: I know our library media specialist already has that three clicks rule. If it takes them more than three clicks to get to something, they're done.*

For these teachers, the resource sets seemed to offer a more appropriate scaffold for self-directed learning, something that would encourage students to go further in their inquiry than they might if they were allowed more free exploration. It seemed from the general agreement among teachers that most web resources are either close-ended or too open-ended for their students to conduct intentional searches. But these high school teachers all felt comfortable using the resource sets as places to scaffold learning and inquiry skills across the curriculum.

Most teachers felt the content was easily navigated and, for advanced students, fulfilling, yet still challenging to those less accomplished students as a structure for their work.

For the teachers who were uninvolved in the development, the resources were considered valuable but again, most did not have a sense of how they might apply these tools in their classroom. For these teachers, the resource sets appeared both rich in value, but also would require a fair bit of effort to imagine how to apply them in the school. These teachers seemed to suggest that they valued the sets because they were created by teachers for teachers, seemed closed enough to fit with their curriculum goals, but would require devoted time to work with these tools to imagine a practical application.

Both the teachers involved in the product development, and the teachers new to the resources seemed to feel that a dedicated professional development session focused on using the resources would be necessary to fully explore the depth and value of the site.

#### *Lectures and Scholars*

The lectures were only discussed briefly in the discussion forums, so this report can only describe some teachers' perspectives on these tools. The teachers involved in the development were pleased with their own work but felt the content was only beginning to fulfill the promise of the section. They were uniformly pleased with the lectures that were accompanied by transcripts and the scale of the "chapters" that allowed them to use sections of the lecture as an introduction or to get to a specific point. Most agreed that they would not be likely to use an entire lecture in their teaching, but would potentially use a few chapters from a lecture over a period of time to explore a topic.

Learn ► MSE Home ► Lectures & Scholars ► America's Maritime Frontiers

## America's Maritime Frontiers

by Dr. John Jensen

**About This Lecture**

Dr. John Jensen's lecture "America's Maritime Frontiers" was recorded in July of 2012 at the Frank C. Munson Institute of American Maritime Studies at Mystic Seaport. The recording and web presentation of the lecture were made possible by the National Endowment for the Humanities.

**Lecture Topics**

1. Introduction
2. Atlantic Maritime World
3. European Expansion
4. Influence of the War of 1812
5. Transportation Revolution: Canals
6. Transportation Revolution: Technology
7. Great Lakes: Maritime Technology

Play the complete audio lecture or download it as an MP3 file (48 minutes)

**In the Classroom**  
Ideas for Classroom Use

### 1. Introduction

0:00 6:01

Transcription

Figure 7, Example of the top section of a lecture page

One of the teachers featured in an interview felt quite proud of her ability to structure her questions at a junior high school level, noting that she felt the content maintained a mature tone but did not use language that was inaccessible and difficult. Others tended to agree, but those teachers who did not know the interviewer and had reviewed the content did not realize the lecture language was aimed at the high school level, feeling it might be a bit mature after a first observation.

In general, however, these teachers felt that this content would be very valuable to supporting their teaching goals and would introduce their students to scholars and content that would stretch their thinking.

*Teacher 1: It was really clear, helpful and saves everybody time. Once there's more, we can figure out how to make them useful but we need more.*

*Teacher 2: We can question, but I don't think there's anything on here that's targeted toward different grade levels. It's pretty high level.*

*Teacher 1: I was targeting as more basic information, I was thinking about people who weren't from this community. I was thinking about people from Ohio. I was thinking what's the target level of this. It has the appearance of being at a higher level. But it isn't. I was trying to think about questions kids would ask. So it's not necessarily high level. Even though it's scholarly thing, I was aiming at the basic level.*

In general, the main sections of the website seem to have achieved the intended purpose. Teachers in these discussions were able to quickly understand how to apply the resources across various courses and at a variety of grade levels. Teachers felt the structure form and content were useful and appropriate. There appeared to be greater need for teacher orientation information, a desire for restructured information for educators that disaggregates curriculum links from ideas for use in the classroom, and a more dynamic overview. Despite these minor issues, most participants in these forums felt this website had innovations that truly reflected their needs as teachers.

### Providing Access to Collections

Another primary goal of this project was to improve access to the Mystic Seaport collections. The project set out to accomplish this through experiments that brought teachers and families directly into the archives and allowed them to self-direct their own inquiry in collaboration with staff. In the subsequent phases of the project, teachers were recruited to collaborate on creation of the online assets in ways that would reveal the depth of the collection through the website in ways that might deepen engagement before a visit, help prepare people for the visit to the Mystic Seaport and provide supplementary material following a visit.

During the first phase of summative evaluation, a number of participants described their excitement about being trusted to handle old and delicate artifacts without any restrictions, one saying, *It's like Indiana Jones, I want to be that guy that has access to cool stuff and for a little while it felt like that!* Another said: *It's so nice to be in a room and it's quiet, and it's just the artifact and me.* The participants said that the artifacts felt like real treasures, and that the impression they got from the museum staff is that they (the staff) would love to have more opportunities to share the materials in the collections. One participant said, *I never would have thought I would walk into the Mystic Seaport and that there would be jars of whale fetuses and all this cool stuff in there. It's just the neatest stuff!*

Participants emphasized the excitement of the freedom of being trusted to spend time with the objects/artifacts/materials, to have unlimited and unsupervised access, and time to *just research (and) go to wherever our minds took us.* In responding to questions about how welcomed and included they were made to feel by staff, the teachers always were very positive and enthusiastic, but they also frequently drifted into exclaiming how excited they were about the Seaport's resources. Another said that even though s(he) grew up in the area and was able to visit the Seaport throughout childhood, s(he) hadn't appreciated the breadth and depth of the treasures

there. Another described the excitement of the whaling ship *Charles W. Morgan*: *Every time they took us on the Morgan – the last wooden whaling ship in the world – I couldn't stop saying, do you have any idea of what they have?... Did you know they have the Morgan?!*

Staff were particularly surprised at the degree to which the teachers and families developed a new connection to the collections:

Staff 1: Yeah, they kind of took ownership and they – the part where we actually went into the vault, that was their favorite part.

During the final phase of the evaluation, it became apparent that the teachers involved in developing the website assets had a sense of shared ownership consistent with the project goals. For these teachers, the use of the online assets helped them scaffold their students' explorations of the assets in advance of a visit.

Teacher 6: Well, we started it – it's probably taken about three or four weeks. We started it in the beginning of November, and then we did research on their topic. ... We did a field trip here, so they got to actually see some of the actual artifacts.

Moderator: How did that go? You're saying they'd seen those artifacts online and then they saw them –

Teacher 6: And then they saw them in real life.

Moderator: And what was that like for them?

Teacher 6: Like light bulbs a little bit. And they took their own photos of it, and then they could use their photos in their projects ... they kind of took ownership and they – the part where we actually went into the vault, that was their favorite part. I think this website is easier to use than the collection ... –

Moderator: Easier for you or easier for your students?

Teacher 6: For the students. Actually, both. I would say both. The other [website] you kind of had to search and find certain things, and this one, everything – like the research – the resource set, that was everything you kind of need in one little pocket.

For these teachers, the new structure of the website helped them shape learning from the collections in more effective ways. As another teacher put it:

Moderator: Well, what do you think the difference is for students when they get access to [these web resources]? What do you think it means – what matters for the students?

*Teacher 2: They're gonna get some content that they can work with, construct their own learning versus a guide for teachers to teach them.*

*Moderator: But what good is that for the Mystic Seaport ?.*

*Teacher 6: Well, we did come here. It was part of the project. And not every student came. So those students that stayed in the classroom were able to still see some of the stuff, but they didn't hear what anybody had to say about it, but there's still that valuable piece of –*

Based on these explanations and the project evidence on the website, we conclude from the general discussion that the new website has expanded access to the collections, increased interpretive value in the classroom and deepened the experience that students have when they visit the museum.

### Professional Development

Although professional development was not perceived as a direct impact of the project as it was initially framed, it became quickly apparent during the first phases of the project that teachers perceived their interactions with the museum as a valued professional development opportunity. To capture this outcome, the evaluation was modified to explore this impact during the formative and summative phase of the project.

During both phases of summative evaluation, there was agreement that teachers often have a negative feeling about *professional development*. One said: *This was the kind of professional development we would LIKE to have. It was a creative process; professional development is usually not about things we are interested in.* When teachers were asked if they felt they had gained as a professional, every participant responded affirmatively, with one explaining that the experience had led to her having a  *fresher perspective*, that it had opened all of their eyes to new research questions and possibilities.

*Teacher: It's been amazing. It felt very rewarding, very worthwhile. I've learned a lot. I personally have professionally developed as a teacher.*

*I came out of this feeling like, "Wow, I can use this same type of research skill and the same type of approach even with my art students. So from a professional point of view in teaching, it was kind of weird how that's not what I expected at all.*

### Process

During the first phase of the summative evaluation, both teachers and staff members described being a bit unclear about the process required to develop the Interactive Artifact Project. Staff relied on each other and the project coordinator to clarify responsibility and what was considered appropriate work for the project. Staff claimed they were uncertain about their time commitment, with most saying they did small things when they could. For some teachers, the open-ended nature of the project allowed for freedom for exploration because they imagined there were no wrong answers to the challenge. Some teachers wanted more clarity in what the museum felt would be *right*. For both groups, there seemed to be a lot of freedom to jump in and try something out. As one person said: *One man's freedom is another man's frustration. I would have liked a little more direction. I kept feeling that I was doing the wrong thing.*

The teachers and Museum staff participating in all phases of the summative evaluation felt that their work was respected and appreciated by one another. Teachers appreciated the time and individual attention staff members gave. Staff members appreciated the value that teachers placed on their knowledge and willingness to help. Staff members felt they devoted very little time to the teachers, and instead worked with them in a way that felt sporadic and limited. Teachers felt the small amount of individualized time they received from staff members fostered a stronger relationship and sense of respect. Teachers described the attention from the staff as demonstrating how much their work and efforts were valued.

All teachers described their meetings with other teachers and staff as useful for organizing their time. They felt the collaboration gave focus to the project. One respondent said that she used the meetings as deadlines of a sort, in order to get organized and pull her thoughts together. Respondents described the process as gratifying. The teachers felt the museum staff's effort to develop partnerships was particularly validating during a period when they tended to describe the political forces around them as demotivating. A number explicitly said they felt respected as teaching professionals, something unusual in their recent dealings with those outside the profession. *I felt respected*, said one participant. Another said the experience was *validating*, but would have liked more explicit feedback from the museum staff.

*Teacher 1: I think that it was very rewarding from a professional standpoint to know that what we have to say and what we want to do and what we can offer the educational community can be valued and validated.*

*Teacher 2: And yet here, we, the teachers as learners. {We} have taken this, and what they're doing to a different level. Look, we didn't know what we were doing and we figured it out and we did this!*

As an interesting cap to this theme, one teacher in the final focus group claimed that being involved in the project was a way to inspire and motivate her students:

*Teacher 4: If kids see us (teachers) this excited, that is going to be what is going to get them hooked on learning.*

### **Project as Co-Creation Experience**

When teachers were asked about the project as a co-creation process the responses were uniformly positive, with all of the teachers saying that they felt like co-creators. One participant said: *They (the museum staff) actually valued us as teachers, and I feel like there was that recognition that teachers know how to co-create. We do it every day!* Another participant said, *It's almost like you are adopting it (the Seaport) again. It's part of who we are and we all have a stake in making it part of the community... recognizing that that is probably what is going to save places like this... if people feel like they are really a part of it.* It was described as a “smart move economically and intellectually” for the museum to reach out to teachers in the community through this program, that doing this kind of outreach is “living up to its mission.”

All teachers interviewed for this study claimed to be interested in staying involved. They all felt that they had become part of the museum and that they would continue to dedicate themselves to building resources for other teachers. When asked if teachers would be willing to serve as mentors, all expressed interest. All of the teachers responded affirmatively but wistfully to this question, saying, *For me, I will do whatever I can to stay involved...*

When asked to discuss the concept of co-creation, teachers suggested that it was not simply a pairing of a teacher to a museum staff person. Instead, there was a sense of being part of a scholarly community

*Teacher 4: when [another teacher in the focus group and I come together] because we [teach] elementary school... we just kinda hopped on with the actual working of the artifact article this past summer. So we didn't get to work quite as long [as other teachers].. And then we ended up I guess co-creating the article because we worked on two different articles together which worked really well for us.*

All teachers involved in the focus groups expressed an explicit interest in staying involved in the project in the future. They felt they received great benefit from participation. When asked if they would be willing to serve as mentors all expressed enthusiastic interest.

*Teacher 3: Oh, it was great. We just kinda fed off each other and ideas like, "Well, maybe we should redo that\ or maybe focus on this a little bit more." So I like that-*

*Teacher 5: Teachers are making it for other teachers. So who knows better than the educators who are using it themselves?*

All participants emphasized how supportive and accessible and available the staff were, and that this was surprising, that they had been worried that the staff would be aloof and closed off and not interested in working with *mere teachers*, but instead, they were *super helpful*, and *super welcoming*. For example, one participant said, *Some of them (the staff) are teaching at every point; it made this place so much bigger and broader.* Participants described the pleasures of working with staff, saying that they were made to feel like part of the museum *family: very giving of her time, very helpful, you realize how much background these people have!, boundless energy and enthusiasm, she is totally the heart and soul.*

### **Impact on Youth**

As noted in the detailed descriptions above, we conclude that the new website is perceived as relevant for supporting student engagement across the curriculum. Although the museum is focused on historical content in general, the website was perceived as equally interesting for language arts, art, humanities and science programs.

Another dominant theme for both staff and teachers was the contribution of the project to youth identity development and sense of place. Staff reported that those students who had worked with the website were more focused during their visits to the site, while others focused on how youth became engaged in the idea of research or themselves as researchers.

*Staff Member: the interpreters and the staff here all said that it just makes for a much more focused and less rowdy. The kids aren't just running in and out. They're really engaged and they're asking specific questions of whatever interpreter is there. So it really is a much better visit.*

*Teacher: It's also a way for them to think of themselves as researchers because now you can say, "Just as the teachers who do research in this, you have. You can research by going further.*

## Conclusion

Based on the results of focus groups with participants involved in development of the Mystic Seaport for Educators website, it appears that the Mystic E-Port Digital Classroom project funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services accomplish all four goals :

*Goal 1: Overcome a deficit in stakeholder input related to its digitization priorities and web access strategies for learners.*

The wide range of teachers and families that collaborated with staff from across the organization to shape the project created a new resource that expands the reach of the collections in ways that are perceived as useful and stakeholder developed. Staff were also more likely to value the input from various external stakeholders following the project and gained respect for what families and teachers can offer to the development of online resources.

*Goal 2: Overcome a lack of community/audience input into the institution's strategic planning for educational tools and resources.*

The teachers and families involved in creating the assets directly shaped the final outcome. Teachers uniformly reported that the result is useful for their teaching goals for elementary to high school learners and is useful across all curriculum areas. Teachers who were not involved in the project development respected the process and felt that their colleagues had represented their interests in ways that made the final result useful.

*Goal 3: Redefine partnerships with local schools based on 21<sup>st</sup> century models of museum community engagement through exploring co-creation or co-delivery strategies and redress the deficit in perceived support for education programs that focus on increasing skills at problem solving, critical thinking, or creative application of historical information to contemporary challenges.*

Teachers reported high levels of satisfaction with their role as co-creators of the online tools. Feedback describing the project as both professional development and as an exercise that helped teachers feel supported as scholars in their own right increased the organization's reputation as a valued supporter of educators. The tools themselves were characterized as supporting critical thinking skills development for students. History teachers and teachers with other curriculum focus all felt that the historical information scaffolded youth concerns with issues they face in contemporary society. We can not confirm that these tools had a direct alignment to any specific contemporary challenge.

*Goal 4: Overcome challenges created by the fiscal crisis in education and public finance that had limited both income and opportunity related to field trips and support for live programs, and restore access in ways that would reposition Mystic Seaport as a community leader that can support dialogue around issues of equity, access and democracy, concepts central to the mission.*

Teachers who participated in summative evaluation focus groups uniformly perceived Mystic Seaport as a community leader that helped foster dialogue around issues of access to the collections, felt that youth or school districts unable to visit the museum had increased access to the collections and resources, and were more likely to understand concepts that are central to the organization's mission.

Based on these findings and the front end and formative reports produced for this project, we conclude that the project achieved the goals and impacts as outlined in the original grant proposal. We note that the website assessed in the final phase of this project did not include all assets developed but was substantially developed. While there are still areas for improvement to the interface structure and hierarchy as noted in the results, the process itself appears to be robust, well supported by teachers and other stakeholders, and appears to be sustainable if funding is allocated to continue to support the staff and teachers efforts to expand the online offerings.

The evaluators feel it is also important to note that the teachers interviewed in the final phase of this summative evaluation, those who were not involved in the development of the online resources uniformly felt that their opinion of Mystic Seaport had changed substantially. While all were positively disposed toward the organization, they now perceived the institution and its mission as a leading thinker or cutting-edge innovator in educational material production. They perceived the institution as at the forefront of web resource development and particularly valued the degree to which the organization supports teachers.

### REFERENCES

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**Submitted March 12, 2014**

## Appendix A

### TEACHER/CO-CREATOR FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

#### Introduction

Thank you all for joining us today. I'm John and I'll be leading this focus group for the next hour. I'd like to start with some ground rules. You are here today because you each have something valuable to say; so we want to make sure that everyone has a chance to speak, and that we all respect each other's opinions. I'm sure you already noticed that we're recording this session. For the next hour, I hope we'll have a chance to talk about some new ideas together. Well, I've introduced myself, and I believe you know each other. But let's just go around the room, say your name and how long you have been involved with Mystic Seaport.

#### Focus Group Questions

1. What do you all call these things you created?
2. Thinking back to when you first started with this program and the orientation. What was that experience like for you.
  - a. <Probe>Tell me about the whole summer.
  - b. <Probe> I've heard some of you call it professional development, can you tell me more about that
3. Have you told your colleagues about these new resources?
  - a. <Probe> How useful do you think it will be for teachers who weren't involved in the project?
  - b. <Can you give me an example >
  - c. <Could you be more specific >
4. What was it like to work with the CRC staff?
  - a. <Probe> Who did you work with the most?
5. How did you work with the education staff?
6. Are you going to be incorporating any of the new IAR's into your class this year?
7. What do you think about the stuff you have built now?
8. How do you think these resources support student engagement?
9. What did your colleagues say when you told them about this program?
10. What was the most rewarding part of the program for you?
11. Would you consider being a mentor to the next round of teachers?

### STAFF FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

#### Introduction

Thank you all for joining us today. I'm John and I'll be leading this focus group for the next hour. I'd like to start with some ground rules. You are here today because you each have something valuable to say; so we want to make sure that everyone has a chance to speak, and that we all respect each other's opinions. I'm sure you already noticed that we're recording this session. For the next hour, I hope we'll have a chance to talk about some new ideas together. Well, I've introduced myself, and I believe you know each other. But let's just go around the room, say your name and how long you have been involved with Mystic Seaport.

#### Focus Group Questions

1. What was it like working with these teachers on the Interactive Artifact Project?
  - a. <probe> Did you discover anything from how the teachers put things together?
2. How does engaging the community in the work of the Mystic Seaport impact the work you do?
3. One of the goals of this grant is to better engage the community. For you in your job, what does that mean?
  - a. <probe> has your ideas of community engagement changed over the past two years
  - b. <possible probe> can you describe an experience that led you to have that different perspective?
4. Do you think that bringing teachers and families into the museum will increase engagement?
5. What do you think about the new Primary Source Workshops
  - a. <follow up> and Virtual Field Trip programs?
6. What would you do now to improve the program?
  - a. <are there rules you think we should be putting in place?>
7. Doing this kind of work is changing your job in some ways, how do you feel about that?
  - a. <probe>What do you think it means about museums and the future?

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## TEACHER/POTENTIAL USER FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

### Recruitment email

Hi <name>,

<name> said that you might be interested in joining us for a focus group on **Wednesday, December 11 from 5:00-6:30**. We would very much like your participation if you are able!

The session will be focused on our new website, Mystic Seaport for Educators ([educators.mysticseaport.org](http://educators.mysticseaport.org)). As you might know from <name>, this is an initiative that the Museum has been working on for three years, so we are very interested in some teacher feedback! Please use the site and familiarize yourself with it between now and December 11 and do not hesitate to call/email me if you have any questions about the site or the focus group.

All of the details for the session are below. I will have snacks and sodas/water there for you guys too. **Please let me know as soon as possible if you are unable to make the session so that I can find another person for that spot.** We truly appreciate your help!

**What:** Focus Group for Teachers To Talk about the Mystic Seaport for Educators Website

**Website URL:** [educators.mysticseaport.org](http://educators.mysticseaport.org)

**Who:** We need teachers who have not been involved in the project in any way. Dr. John Fraser of New Knowledge will lead the session.

**When:** December 11<sup>th</sup>, from 5:00-6:30

**Where:** The Keener Room at Mystic Seaport (directions)

**Contact:** Krystal Rose at Mystic Seaport-  
[krystal.rose@mysticseaport.org](mailto:krystal.rose@mysticseaport.org) / 860-572-0711 ext. 5025,

Thanks!

**Krystal Kornegay Rose**

Project Manager- Mystic Seaport for Educators

NewKnowledge Report #IMLS.57.58.02



Mystic E-port Digital Classroom Summative Evaluation  
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## Introduction

Thank you all for joining us today. I'm John and I'll be leading this focus group for the next hour. Have any of you attended a focus group discussion before? <great, etc..> As you may recall from the invitation email that Krystal sent out, in the next hour and a half, I hope we'll have a chance to talk about your reactions to the online resources that have been created by some of your colleagues in collaboration with Mystic Seaport.

I'd like to start with some ground rules. You are here today because you each have something valuable to say; so we want to make sure that everyone has a chance to speak, and that we all respect each other's opinions. I'm sure you already noticed that we're recording this session. Well, I've introduced myself, and I believe you know each other. But let's just go around the room, say your name and one sentence about what you believe Mystic Seaport offers to you as a teacher.

## Focus Group Questions

1. Before you received the invitation from Krystal, what had you heard about this website?
2. Have you all had a chance to visit the Mystic Seaport for Educators Website?
3. Let's start off with first reactions? What are your thoughts about that website?
4. How do you think these resources align to your goals as a teacher?
5. Let's talk about the resources, what really stood out as useful for you? (teachers guide discussion through different sections to cover all parts)
  - a. <probe> What questions do you have about this site?
6. As you can see, this is a community created tool. How might you imagine yourself as part of this community?
  - a. <probe>, Do you think you'll contribute to this site?
7. Do you have any other thoughts about how useful this resource will be for teachers like you?