

# CULTURAL COLLECTIONS AND OBJECT-BASED LEARNING IN THE FACULTY OF ARTS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE

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In an increasingly competitive tertiary educational sector, the Faculty of Arts at the University of Melbourne has sought to differentiate itself from other universities teaching the humanities in Australia by integrating the University's vast cultural collections into the curriculum of its Bachelor of Arts degree. The University is the custodian of more than thirty cultural collections. These collections were acquired for the purposes of teaching, research, and display, and have allowed the Faculty of Arts to develop a strong focus on object-based and experiential learning where cultural material is at the heart of curriculum development. The integration of objects into subjects taught in the Bachelor of Arts is also supported by technology and on-line platforms that provide students with an enhanced learning experience that combines the virtual realm with the physical.

At the centre of the Faculty's ability to implement and deliver object-based learning is its new purpose-built building – Arts West – which was established specifically for the teaching of the Bachelor of Arts degree. Designed by Melbourne architectural firms ARM and Architectus, it opened in July 2016 and has provided Arts students

with an identifiable home, offering them twenty-four new teaching spaces. These spaces were designed to allow academics to adopt a collaborative, interactive, and discursive approach to their teaching. The rooms can also be easily reconfigured to allow for group discussions and group assessment projects, providing greater peer-to-peer learning opportunities. Arts West also provides students with a number of study spaces located throughout the building. Cleverly integrated into the interiors, these spaces also provide students with a sense of discoverability as they can seek out and locate a place for private study.

The Bachelor of Arts degree offers students more than thirty areas of study. However, prior to the opening of Arts West, students undertaking this degree did not have their “own” building and their lectures and tutorials were often scattered across the ever expanding University of Melbourne campus. Arts West has thus provided students with their own distinctive facility and, as this paper will outline, it is a space not only dedicated to teaching and learning, but also combines the ideas of a museum and gallery with that of a site for digital creativity and scholarship.



The exterior of Arts West, 2016.  
Image courtesy of John Gollings.

Of central importance to the delivery of object-based learning at Arts West is its two purpose-built object-based learning labs. These spaces are designed with a number of in-built display cases that allow objects to be displayed and retrieved for teaching. The spaces are modelled on that of a museum and are fully climate-controlled. Students and academics using the labs must follow conditions applicable to a museum. One of the labs is designed with a lectern and in-built seating for thirty people. The other lab is a more flexible space which can be reconfigured to suit the subject being taught in the room. Each lab is equipped with full audio-visual capabilities including data projectors, screens, and document cameras.

The term object-based learning will be very familiar to those who have worked in museum education, as at the heart of this type of learning

is engaging with and learning directly from objects. Universities such as Melbourne which have large cultural collections to draw upon are thus in a position to provide innovative and thought-provoking ways to develop new curriculums and as such “can play a central role in the academic change process” (Simpson 2014, 18). In the Faculty of Arts, object-based learning introduces students to the practical experience of handling, researching, and using cultural collections while developing their analytical and visual skills. It also encourages students to engage with objects to facilitate their learning experience and often assists in breaking down language barriers. Learning directly from an object enables students to impart that object with their own interpretation while reflecting on, and drawing upon their own lived experiences and cultural beliefs.



Arts West Atrium, 2016.  
Image courtesy of John Gollings.

The Bachelor of Arts is one of the University of Melbourne's oldest degrees and can be traced back to the foundation of the University in 1853, with the passing by the Victorian Government of the Act to Incorporate and Endow the University of Melbourne which gave the authority for the University to award the degrees of "Bachelor of Arts (and) Master of Arts" (1853, 3). Students undertaking the newly offered Bachelor of Arts were required to study Greek and Latin (Macintyre and Selleck 2004, 3). As such, the University has a long tradition in teaching classical studies and its Classics and Archaeology Collection is one of its oldest collections acquired for the purposes of teaching and research.

Object-based learning at the University has for many years been undertaken across a variety of disciplines, frequently facilitated by the academics, curators, collection managers, librarians, and archivists who manage its vast cultural holdings. Their often ground-breaking work in this area is the cornerstone upon which object-based learning within the Faculty of Arts is built. Arts West draws upon this history and provides dedicated facilities and spaces for this of type of learning and teaching to continue and flourish within the delivery of the Bachelor of Arts degree.

Object-based learning is also a key part of the University of Melbourne's engagement strategy as set out in its *Engagement at Melbourne 2015-2020* policy. The University has identified this type of pedagogy as playing a central role in delivering one of the policy's key commitments -- "Engaged Students" -- which states that "the expansion of object-based learning, leveraging the University's unique cultural collections, demonstrates the learning opportunities created by innovative curriculum and pedagogy" (The University of Melbourne 2015, 11).

The University of Melbourne's Cultural Collections are core to the delivery of object-based learning at Arts West. These collections span not only the humanities with materials such as archival documents, fine arts, rare books, rare maps, music, and prints; but also the sciences including botany, physics, engineering, and earth sciences; and in the areas of medicine, dentistry, anatomy, architecture, and law. The University also has several museums and galleries including the Ian Potter Museum of Art (which houses and displays the University of Melbourne's Art Collection as well as a rotating programme of temporary exhibitions), the Grainger Museum (Australia's only autobiographical museum housing the collection of, and dedicated to, the Australian



Object-based learning lab at Arts West, 2016.  
Image courtesy of John Gollings.

pianist and composer, Percy Grainger), the Medical History Museum, the Henry Forman Atkinson Dental Museum, the Harry Brooks Allen Museum of Anatomy and Pathology and the Tieg's Zoology Museum.<sup>1</sup> The richness, diversity, and breadth of the collections in essence reflect and document the University's social, cultural, intellectual, and research history. As the University of Melbourne is so fortunate to have such a wide variety of cultural collections to incorporate into its academic programmes, it is in a strong position to emphasise object-based learning and to provide students in the Bachelor of Arts degree with a study experience

that goes beyond the traditional lecture/ tutorial model. This experience encourages an interdisciplinary approach where students work with both humanities and science collections throughout their degree.

Arts West not only provides two dedicated object-based learning labs, it is also equipped with a gallery as well as a large number of in-built display cases located on each floor of the building spanning from the ground to the sixth floor. The Arts West Gallery is programmed to host exhibitions that draw on the University of Melbourne's Cultural Collections, and

<sup>1</sup> For a complete listing of the University of Melbourne's Cultural Collections and Museums, see <http://museumsandcollections.unimelb.edu/>.

also provides academics with opportunities to develop new subjects based around the displays and to incorporate them into a subject's assessment. The Gallery also houses a seminar/meeting room where tutorials can be held. Students may also use it as a study room as it has a small number of tables and chairs.

The display cases situated throughout Arts West have provided opportunities to profile the University's Cultural Collections and allow for displays to be developed around specific subjects being taught in the Bachelor of Arts programme. Thus, the display cases take on an informal teaching function and extend the curriculum being taught in the classroom by referring students to objects in these displays and allowing them to view items that enhance their understanding of a particular subject. Research being undertaken by staff and students in the Faculty of Arts has also been used to develop displays.

The display cases will also allow the Faculty to extend its current advancement and engagement activities. Engagement at the University of Melbourne is an important part of the institution's overall operating strategy. This is encapsulated in the previously mentioned *Engagement at Melbourne 2015-2020*. As part of its engagement strategy, the Faculty has a number of partnerships with many of Victoria's preeminent cultural institutions and festivals and it is now in a position to further collaborate with these partners by providing Arts West as a display space and venue for future projects. These projects will have strong emphases on learning and exploration, and will also provide internships and work integrated learning opportunities where students will be based at Arts West working with a cultural partner to develop a specific display or programme to take place in the building that will also draw on the University's cultural collections. Arts West thus provides a means by which the Faculty of Arts can deliver on one of the core commitments set out in its *Engagement at Melbourne 2015-2020*

-- that "a University of Melbourne education prepares graduates for lives of professional contribution, leadership and active citizenship as engaged alumni" (The University of Melbourne 2015, 6).

Arts West was also designed as a site for digital humanities research, scholarship, and exploration. The Digital Studio, located across two floors of the Arts West building, was established to "provide a range of services and infrastructure to support University researchers, professionals and selected industry experts and students working on digital projects in the humanities, arts and social sciences" (The Faculty of Arts 2017a). It is equipped with a large range of technology and is staffed by experts who are on hand to assist and support students, academics, and industry partners engage in digital scholarship. The Digital Studio is also equipped with an exhibition space to showcase screen-based art works and two immersive rooms with 180-degree screens (The Faculty of Arts 2017b).

In the increasingly digital world that we all live in, Arts West is a unique building that allows students to learn directly from the physical object. The Cultural Collections are paramount to how the building was designed, and are complemented and enhanced through on-line platforms and digital scholarship. From its founding in 1903, the Faculty of Arts at the University of Melbourne has sought to be a leader in the study of the humanities and social sciences and Arts West strongly places the Faculty in a position to continue this tradition.

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## References

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