Mediating Connections through Materiality: Cultures and Communities

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ABSTRACT
Objects and their associations are a means of self-expression and an integral part of identity making. Our panelists and our participants together will engage in exploring, defining and theorizing diverse research spaces of mediating connections through materiality. The panel is a discursive arena where participants engaged in different communities engage in material practices. In this session the panelists and participants will walk through the process of mediating connections through materiality in real time. The session is intended to be about the process—the means to an end, not an end in itself: shifting boundaries, identifying connections, moving margins and creating a participatory practice that embodies the very connections we hope to enact. Together we are moving from {apart from} to {a part of} – thus our practice reflects what we have experienced in our respective projects, facilitating in a material way the practice of boundary-spanning. This interactive session essentially speaks to all aspects of the conference theme of Connecting Collections, Cultures, and Communities.

Keywords
Materialities, cultural practices, community meaning-making, boundaries, narrative identities.

INTRODUCTION
“…through time and space humans have used objects to express, or to explore, some of the purposes that animate their own individual lives, as well as those that bound them to or divided them from each other.”

(Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981, 38)

Objects and their associated narratives are a means of self-expression and assist in the maintenance of a cohesive identity. Likewise, objects can be regarded as concrete reflections of what is meaningful in one’s life, conveying one’s values, goals and aspirations, and serving as a form of self-expression, all of which may be more or less aligned with social norms (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981). An object’s meaning is invested by its owner (Belk, 1990), and expressed through narratives told about it, which are ultimately about the self (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981). Personal objects in the ambient environment can be seen as assisting in the “stability” of self over time by “constantly instruct[ing us] in who we are and what we aspire to… making [our] past a virtual, substantial part of our present” (McCracken, 1988: 124).

In addition, objects, their associated narratives, and “meanings” have properties and elements that allow them to be categorized in terms of affinities (similarities) and distinctions (differences) though perhaps not in the same way by any two people. For example, the same spoon might be perceived as a tool, or as an heirloom depending on one’s perspective. Objects can be seen to play a role in how individuals “integrate” or “differentiate” themselves from others in society (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981).

Individual stories or self narratives can be viewed as exercises in self-interpretation, by which people find meaning and make sense of their experiences (Ricoeur, 1991, 1992; Sherman, 1994). According to Baumeister & Newman (1994: 688) four needs for meaning guide the construction of a self-narrative, as follows:

Some stories satisfy a need for purposiveness by depicting the attainment of significant goals or fulfillment states. Others satisfy a need for justification by portraying one’s actions as consistent with values, norms, and expectations and by explaining intentions in a comprehensible, acceptable fashion. Other stories help satisfy a need for efficacy by encoding useful information about how to
control the environment. Lastly, many stories support the narrator's claims to self-worth by portraying him or her as a competent and attractive person.

Bruner (2004) considers personal narrative or “autobiographies” from a constructivist stance. A “self-told life” should be interpreted, “not as a record of what happened (which is in any case a nonexistent record) but rather as a continuing interpretation and reinterpretation of our experience” wherein, “we become the autobiographical narrators by which we ‘tell about’ our lives” (Bruner, 2004: 691-92; 694). But while personal meaning may derive from “an interpretive feat” (Bruner, 2004: 693), autobiographies do follow a common formal structure influenced by cultural and linguistic norms. Referring to Jean-Paul Sartre (1964), Bruner notes that, “life stories must mesh, so to speak, within a community of life stories; tellers and listeners must share some ‘deep structure’ about the nature of a ‘life,’ for if the rules of life-telling are altogether arbitrary, tellers and listeners will surely be alienated by a failure to grasp what the other is saying or what he thinks the other is hearing.” Within this latter quote one sees the link between personal and communal narrative (life-storytelling), and the importance of negotiated meaning as one situates expressions of self-identity within the context of group identity (community).

Drucilla Cornell (1992), in her re-creation of deconstruction as the philosophy of the limit, posits the idea that all systems have limits and those limits include some individuals and/or groups, and exclude others. The one who is on the inside has an infinite responsibility to the Other who is outside of the system. Cornell advocates not stretching the limit – there will always be a limit excluding someone – but to make the limit permeable. Then the one can invite the Other to make her voice heard in the system and the Other may decide whether or not she wants to do so. In the case of objects as surrogates for narratives, a given surrogate may be the key to clustering narratives in such a way that the object is somewhat like the connections made by a switching language or crosswalk. The object as a surrogate represents narratives individually, but in so doing links seemingly disparate stories. By starting with an object and using it to represent or to stand in for any number of fluid entities, such as people, places, things, or events, etc., the object is transformed into a fluid and dynamic surrogate to secure spaces for marginalized voices (Howarth and Olsen, 2013). Homi Bhabha’s (1994) concept of the Third Space likewise offers a scenario where the surrogate object ceases to be a static representation of a “real” thing, becoming, instead, a kind of driver for meaning and memory-making (Olsen and Howarth, 2013), individually and collectively.

**EXPLORING CONNECTIONS: AN INTERACTIVE PROGRESSION**

This panel session will begin with the premise that objects—in the form of documents, artefacts, and technologies—can (and do) mediate connections between cultures and communities in various configurations. Objects connect communities to culture (i.e., reconnect individuals to their culture); objects connect cultures (i.e., mediate between two or more different cultures); communities and cultures assign meaning to objects; and objects contribute to a sense of individual and community identity.

At the same time, cultures and communities can (and do) assign meaning to objects (materiality) in the form of documents, artefacts, and technologies. The four panelists will explore how materiality is defined within the context of their respective projects. What is the nature of the connectedness? Can one see the commonalities even where there appear to be differences and differences even where there appear to be commonalities? The nature and strength of the connections may depend on context.

**Making connections: Individual Participants**

This panel session is conceived as the means to an end, and not as the end in itself. Building on the etymology of connection— or Latin connexiōn—as the line that brings two or more related or unrelated things together, with multiple iterations conjoining into the creation of a network, we will begin by having participants engage with the title of the session by mapping associations between and among each of the three concepts of (1) materiality, (2) cultures, and (3) communities. This first intellectual exercise is intended to stimulate participants’ free associations and preconceptions, relative to these concepts, perhaps to offer concrete examples based on research or personal experience.

**Making connections: Panelists**

The panelists will then share their respective projects exploring how they believe them to be connected to the session title, while at the same time acknowledging and respecting their plurality, even their separateness relative to that title. The focus of this panel is in the co-creation of knowledge that connects communities mediated by multiple meanings. Our goal is to share experientially with the participants, to bring together diverse communities and voices, and to embody spaces for narratives, self-narratives and surrogate objects to co-exist in unity.

**Making connections: Individual Participants**

Following the four panel presentations, the audience will be asked to revisit their original mappings/associations to determine if and/or in what ways their sense of connectedness may have changed based on the presentations.
Making connections: Participant Groups and Panelists
In order to further engage in participatory practice that embodies the connections the session hopes to enact, participants will be invited to move to one of four tables corresponding with each of the projects presented by the panelists. An individual might choose to associate with a project based on a proposed or ongoing research study of his or her own, based on an interest in a particular target community (e.g., indigenous, cognitively impaired, immigrant women), or an association with a culture, or a type of materiality, etc. Each table group will be challenged to curate a common mapping or network of associations surrounding or linking (1) individual projects, proposals, or interests, (2) the panel project corresponding to that table group, (3) other panel projects presented during the session, and (4) any other researchers, publications, or other links of relevance illustrating where and how resulting connections were identified, and how boundaries were negotiated and spanned. This final activity and discussion will afford participants the opportunity to make their own connections, and to identify potential future collaborations with similarly interested colleagues. Consequently, participants will leave the session having enacted the panel title – having mediated connections through the materiality of an artefact (the mappings), and agency (individual participant; group curators). At this point, panelists and participants will have moved from the roles of presenter-audience to those of future collaborators.

PANELISTS AND THEIR PERSPECTIVES

Ivette Bayo Urban, MEd, MSIS is a Doctoral Candidate at the University of Washington working on issues of technology access and use, from a perspective of culture, identity and gender. She is a feminist and indigenist scholar attentive to the complex and uneven relations that are embedded in socio-technical systems.

Ivette Bayo Urban has been collaborating with Casa Latina, a local non-profit in Seattle for the last year. Casa Latina was founded in 1994 to empower Seattle’s Latino immigrants by providing them educational and economic opportunities, giving people the tools they need to work, live, support their families, and contribute to the Seattle community. In her work she has been facilitating technology workshops with women in the Mujeres Sin Fronteras (MSF) group and sees technology as a force for mediating connections; artefacts that bring together culture, community and information access, a kind of virtual collection. For the most part, the Spanish-speaking immigrant women who attend the MSF group have families outside of the United States, and for them, technology use can serve as mediator to connections for 1) material work (getting jobs, communicating with employers, mediating languages) 2) virtual connecting their families (both within and outside of these borders) and 3) between communities and culture (the intersection of cultures and communities here and beyond national borders). Together with the other panelists, Bayo Urban will share insights on the materiality in the context of work with underrepresented communities.

Iulian Vamanu, MA, MPhil, PhD recently defended his doctoral thesis in Information Science at the School of Communication and Information at Rutgers University, and will be assuming an appointment as Assistant Professor at the University of Iowa. He is interested in dimensions of cultural knowledge and boundary phenomena in Library and Information Science.

Iulian Vamanu has been working in the last few years on a dissertation on discursive constructions of indigenous knowledge. For this purpose, he relied on interviews with, as well as on scholarly and curatorial works of twenty North-American indigenous. His presentation develops one insight from his dissertation, namely the mediating roles of these information professionals and their social and material practices at the boundaries between cultures and communities. Specifically, the presentation looks at the community of indigenous curators as a key material component of the discursive constructions of indigenous knowledge and considers the various mediating roles these professionals perform through their social and material practices. Indigenous curators mediate various types of connections between communities (e.g., Native artists, on one hand, and other communities, such as funding entities, publishers, etc., on the other hand); between cultures (e.g., Native cultures and mainstream cultures); as well as between communities and cultures (e.g., Native tribal communities and their cultures; Native audiences of the exhibits and their cultures; non-Native audiences and Native cultures). Based on these key roles, Vamanu will show how indigenous curators emerge as key boundary agents in the discursive arena of indigenous knowledge.

Lynne Howarth, MLS, PhD is Professor in the Faculty of Information, University of Toronto (iSchool @ Toronto).

Objects and their associated narratives are a means of self-expression, and assist in the maintenance of a cohesive identity. That personal objects can be instrumental in supporting a cohesive yet dynamic expression of self over time, has been underscored during the course of research engaging individuals with early stages of dementia. Specifically, “Creating Pathways to Memory” (CPTM) has examined how representative surrogates or “tokens” (photographs, music, textiles, physical objects, etc.) trigger and/or enhance memory recall in individuals with mild Alzheimer’s Disease (AD). Whether an individual or group activity, and regardless of whether objects are selected personally or by others, the practice of common reminiscence underscores the continuous validation of self-identity, and the expression of “self” to others through objects as a means of building connection, fostering greater understanding, and remaining engaged socially. Autobiographical narrative or storytelling around objects introduces a common and “neutral” space for engaging in conversation and rich interaction with others. The object-
personal narrative (OPN) methodology can be used effectively to give voice to those with AD who are alienated and marginalized simply by virtue of being “labeled” clinically. In spite of steady cognitive decline, they need not lose the right and assumption to be heard and valued free of labeling. Howarth will discuss findings from the study, addressing how the OPN methodology is being applied with groups of individuals experiencing cultural alienation in a subsequent, as well as a proposed individual/community study.

Cara Krmpotich, MA, DPhil is Assistant Professor, and Jamil Ghaddar is a doctoral candidate at the Faculty of Information, University of Toronto (iSchool @ Toronto).

The Memory, Meaning-making and Culture project revitalizes a material heritage collection, bringing seniors and intergenerational groups into physical contact with a group of objects that reflect the daily lives of Aboriginal Canadians throughout the twentieth century. It provides collective spaces for seniors to discuss their histories, heritage, and craft-making practices and in so doing, builds our sense of the history and heritage of urban aboriginal populations in Canada, including residential school history. This process of re-engagement is inspired by 1) the collection of hand crafted artifacts itself, 2) the interests, needs and mandate of the Native Canadian Centre of Toronto (NCCT) and Toronto Native Community History Project (TNCHP), and 3) research questions focused on the role of objects in enriching memory recall and in constructing, affirming, and challenging collective memory and identities. Krmpotich and/or Ghaddar will report on key findings from the first year of research engaging aboriginal seniors and youth around a “found” collection of hand-crafted artifacts.

CONCLUSION
The proposed panel reflects and incorporates a process that each of the panelists has experienced in the course of engaging in research involving cultures, communities, and objects (materiality). Each panelist will describe how preconceptions, and initial assumptions came to be profoundly challenged as the associations among those three concepts shifted and changed across the course of each study. The proposed panel session arose from a recognition of the commonalities, and an appreciation for the differences among the four projects, and the potential to share our experiences of the value of research that engages people with artefacts of all kinds and modalities. The step-wise interactions described previously in this proposal mimic the process that has informed the panelists individually, and now as collaborators in negotiating boundaries and making connections. The session is intended to facilitate a similar journey for participants.

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REFERENCES


