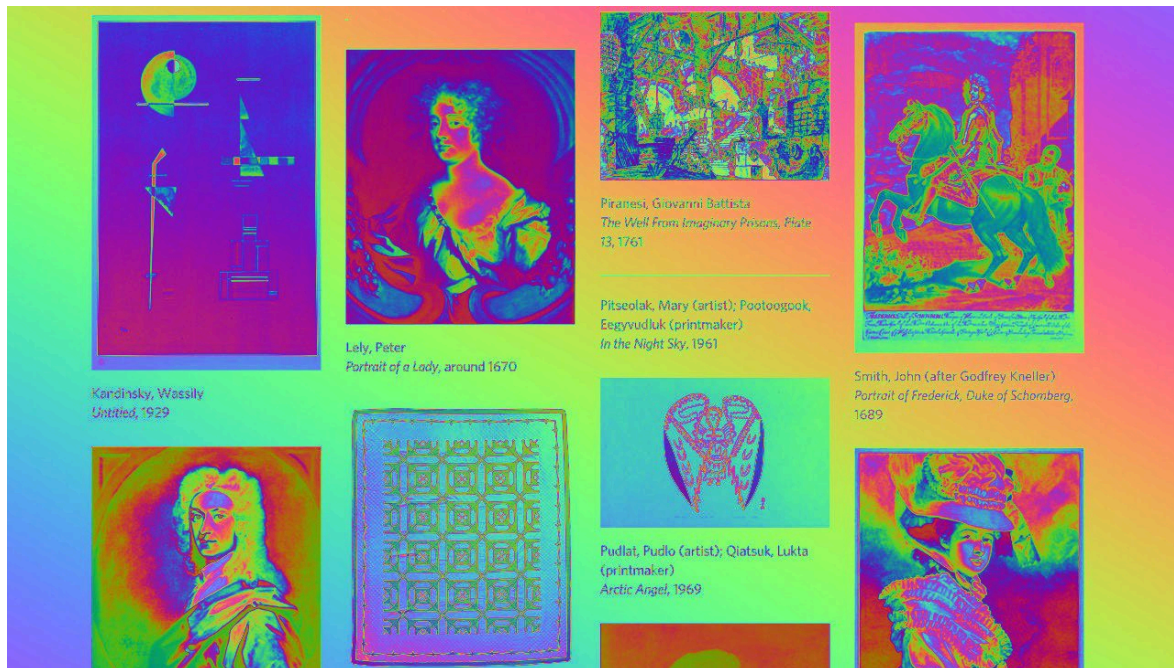


Workshop: Manifesting Reimagined Online Collections Portals

Tuesday, 16 August 2022



Glitched screenshot from a search of Agnes's online collection portal.

Participants engage with each other through activities and brainstorm how to reimagine new online portals/interfaces for museum collections and what needs to happen to make them a reality. Using prompting questions and a Mural whiteboard, the resulting discussions are documented and turned into a living manifesto for new futures for the digital presence of online collections that is shared publicly. The workshop also informs Agnes's ongoing digitization projects and upcoming plans for My AGNES, a community-centric platform and online collections portal.

The workshop was facilitated by Jennifer Nicoll, Collections Manager/Exhibitions Coordinator and Danuta Sierhuis, Digital Development Coordinator, Agnes Etherington Art Centre.

The workshop was a part of the programming related to the Institute for Curatorial Inquiry, Agnes Etherington Art Centre (14-19 August 2022) and Museums Without Walls, Queen's University (15-17 August 2022).

We would like to acknowledge the workshop participants for their insights and for learning alongside us as we work towards reimagining online collections portals: Aarati Akkapeddi, Jessica Benjak-Waterous, Trina Cooper-Bolam, Kate Ducharme, Charlotte Gagnier, Thomas H. Greiner, Prakash Krishnan, Brandie MacDonald, Erin Messier, Emily Putnam, Evan Wainio-Woldanski and Theresa Wang.

Documentation for this workshop is collated and edited by Kate Ducharme, Charlotte Gagnier, Erin Messier, Jennifer Nicoll and Danuta Sierhuis.

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A Manifesto for Reimagined Online Collections Portals

“Knowledge management reflects the same social biases that exist in society, because human beings are at the epicenter of information curation. These practices of the past are part of the present, and only committed and protracted investments in repairing knowledge stores to reflect and recenter all communities can cause a shift toward equality and inclusion in the future. This includes reconciling our brutal past rather than obscuring or minimizing it. In this way, we have yet to fully confront our histories and reconstitute libraries and museums toward reconciliation and reparation.”

Safiya Umoja Noble. 2018. *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*.

“...postcolonial digital humanities is not only a theoretical or analytical approach to the digital cultural record. Rather, it requires praxis at the intersection of digital technologies and humanistic inquiry: designing new workflows and building new archives, tools, databases, and other digital objects that actively resist reinscriptions of colonialism and neo-colonialism. Consequently, postcolonial digital humanities explores how we might remake the worlds instantiated in the digital cultural record through politically, ethically, and social justice-minded approaches to digital knowledge production.”

Roopika Risam. 2019. *New Digital Worlds: Postcolonial Digital Humanities in Theory, Praxis, and Pedagogy*.

“What does it mean to imagine an alternative, feminist interface? Feminism here does not mean “for women”—it means “from a feminist framework.” This should include a range of justice-centered approaches to interaction design, including feminist human-computer interaction (HCI), post-colonial computing, intersectional design, gender HCI, and design justice.”

Tendernet Collective (ZB BR KP). 2019. *Imagining Feminist Interfaces: Voice Interactions For Agency, Empowerment, and Justice*.

Collections portals have not changed significantly since they went online in the late-1990s/early-2000s. The information that is typically presented in these portals follows the museum’s priorities for digitization, the logic of the database and the interpretations of curators and collections managers. Over the past decade, more attention has been paid to the experience of the end-user and the design of the interfaces of online collections portals, but they have been consistently imagined from a Western, Euro-centric, colonial point of view. What would it look like if these portals were reimagined to be multiplicitous in their values and in their world-views, offering community-oriented access to better serve source communities and researchers alike?

The Current State of Things

Collectively, we identified that online collections portals within museums are currently:

1. Serving a function to primarily provide public access to local and international communities to find information about artworks.
2. Primarily serving educators and researchers looking for information about artworks.
3. Sites of self-promotion, offering the institution a chance to extend their reach beyond physical walls.
4. A space to share “pretty pictures” and to legitimize their existence.

5. Reflecting knowledge hierarchies and elitism. Visitors have to know what they are looking for already.
6. Not serving Indigenous communities, other marginalized communities and/or communities seeking repatriation of their cultural heritage. There is no right of refusal built into the design of these systems or portals.
7. Not thought of beyond their utility/use.
8. Not taking into account non-Western notions of care for the digital manifestations of collections.
9. Not uplifting communities, but are rather uplifting donors.
10. Not designed with accessibility in mind. For example, there are no visual descriptions (alt-text, image descriptions) of artworks.
11. Not transparent in what information gets shared and what doesn't, why this is and for whom the information is shared in the first place.
12. Can be technologically inaccessible for those without/with limited Internet connections, devices (computers, smartphones, etc.), and for demographics for whom navigating the Internet does not come naturally.
13. Doing too many things through their interfaces and it creates a messy experience for the end-user/visitor.

Reimagining for the Future

In dreaming about future iterations of online collections portals in museums, we collectively hope:

1. That they both reflect data practices and are designed with strong values, ethical considerations and thoughtful transparency around decision-making; acknowledging the museum's past ways of working while building towards new practices.
2. That they are informed by Futurisms, including Indigenous and Afro- Futurisms.
3. That they respect and protect ancestors and cultural belongings that are sacred, following the source community's guidance and the appropriate cultural protocols for what can and should not be shared online.
4. That they are able to be more lively spaces for communities and for cultural exchange around art.
5. That there is more transparency around who is updating records and when they were last updated (e.g. like Wikipedia's edit histories).
6. That there are layers and multiple ways of knowing reflected in the records, that the interfaces are permeable and open to collaboration.
7. That they invite community participation and create space for "movement building" and let the community's knowledge and guidance come to bear on institutional practices.
8. That they serve a pedagogical and community building role, building new relationships.
9. That they reflect multiplicity and poly-vocal collaborations across communities and world-views, no longer upholding hierarchies around knowledge production.
10. That they uphold principles of universal access and inclusion, removing as many barriers to participation as possible.

11. That the interfaces are designed to encourage a “quality experience” so that folks want to spend time with the art and to “feel at home.”
12. That the interfaces are designed with community members in mind—including artists and cultural communities—not just researchers, academics and museum colleagues. Expanding the notion of who are the museum’s “public(s).”

Manifesting our Dreams

Reflecting on the current state of online collections portals and where we hope to be with them in the future, here is where we outline the steps we can take to manifest reimagined collections practices to build new online collections portals.

1. Building relationships with communities.
2. Consulting with communities is essential to knowing what the museum can and absolutely cannot share online (or in any format).
3. Community consultation should be a yearly budget line. Knowledge, time and information is powerful and it is valuable. Your community consultants must be paid.
4. Understand that consultation is not a one-time situation, and that you are building an ongoing relationship.
5. Shift the way you think of the museum “owning” collections to “stewarding” collections on behalf of communities. Understand that this isn’t a static relationship because communities are not static.
6. Understand that communities need clarity and information to make their decisions in order to grant consent on what can and cannot be made available. Understand that consent is retractable.
7. Consider your institution’s values – how are they being reflected through your online collections portal?
8. Consider the terms by which the museum makes the collection accessible – who does this serve and why?
9. Consider who is writing and/or contributing to the records.
10. Consider more human-centric design processes that include members of your community throughout the redesign process of your online collection interface – what is it that they want to see? What do they not want to see?

Appendix 1: Workshop Questions

For each round of prompting questions, participants were grouped into three groups of 4-5 and they each had 10-minutes to reflect and come up with how they would like to collectively answer. Participants were then asked to share their ideas with the larger group.

Round 1

In these questions we are considering current online museum collection portals.

What is the purpose and what are the values of an online collection portal?

What information(s) is shared and what isn't?

Who does and who doesn't it serve?

And why do you think this?

Round 2

In these questions we are speculating about the future of reimagined online museum portals.

What are its values?

What could be the purpose of an online collection portal?

What information(s) might be shared and what shouldn't be?

Who does it serve?

What are you most hopeful to see in the digital presentation of collections?

Round 3

How do we get from what we have described in the first round of questions to the hoped for outcomes in the second round of questions?

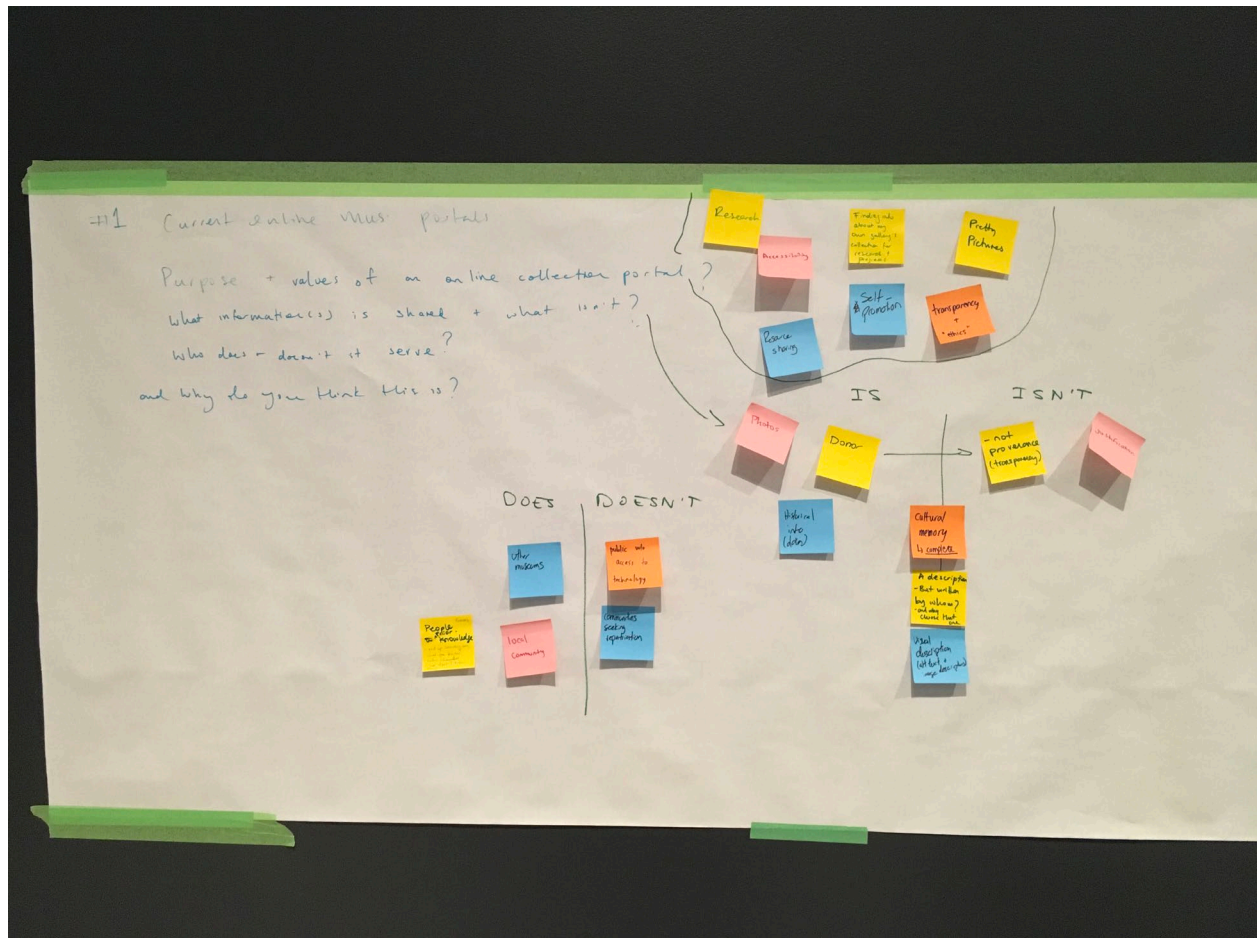
Appendix 2: Digital Documentation of Workshop

Image credits: Jennifer Nicoll.

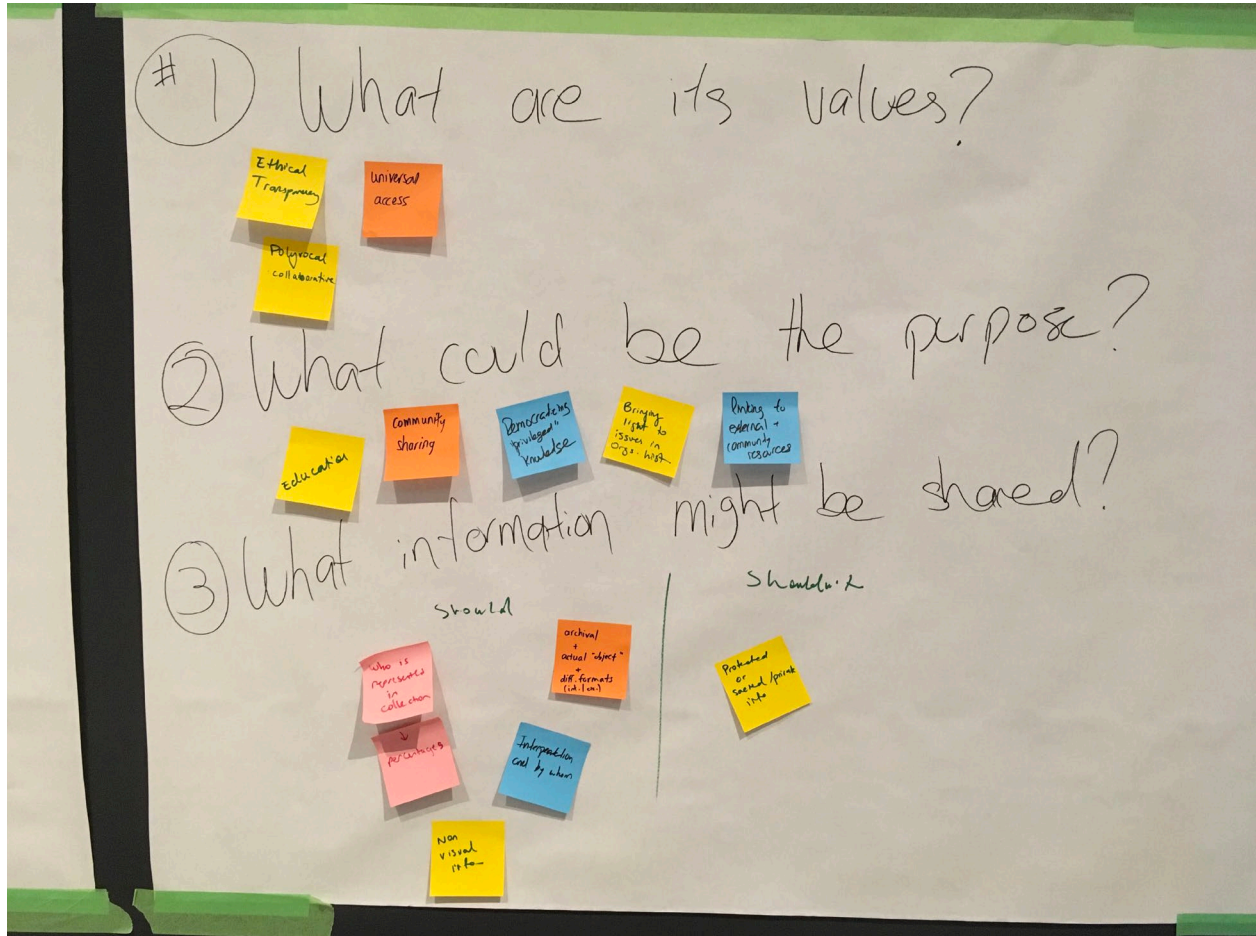
Group 1

Jessica Benjak-Waterous, Charlotte Gagnier, Thomas H. Greiner and Prakash Krishnan.

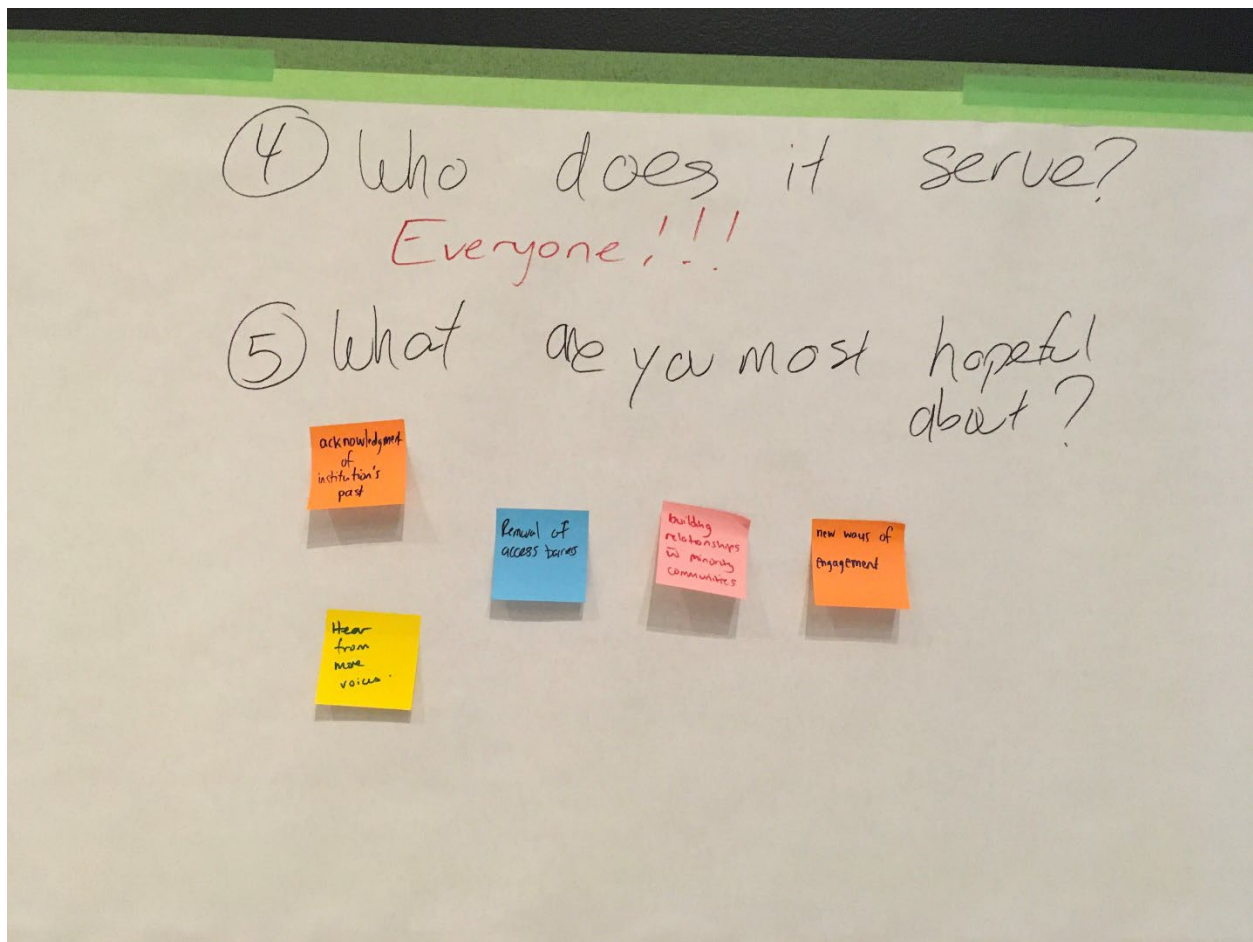
Round 1: In these questions we are considering current online museum collection portals. What is the purpose and what are the values of an online collection portal? What information(s) is shared and what isn't? Who does and who doesn't it serve? And why do you think this?



Round 2: In these questions we are speculating about the future of reimagined online museum portals. What are its values? What could be the purpose of an online collection portal? What information(s) might be shared and what shouldn't be? Who does it serve? What are you most hopeful to see in the digital presentation of collections?



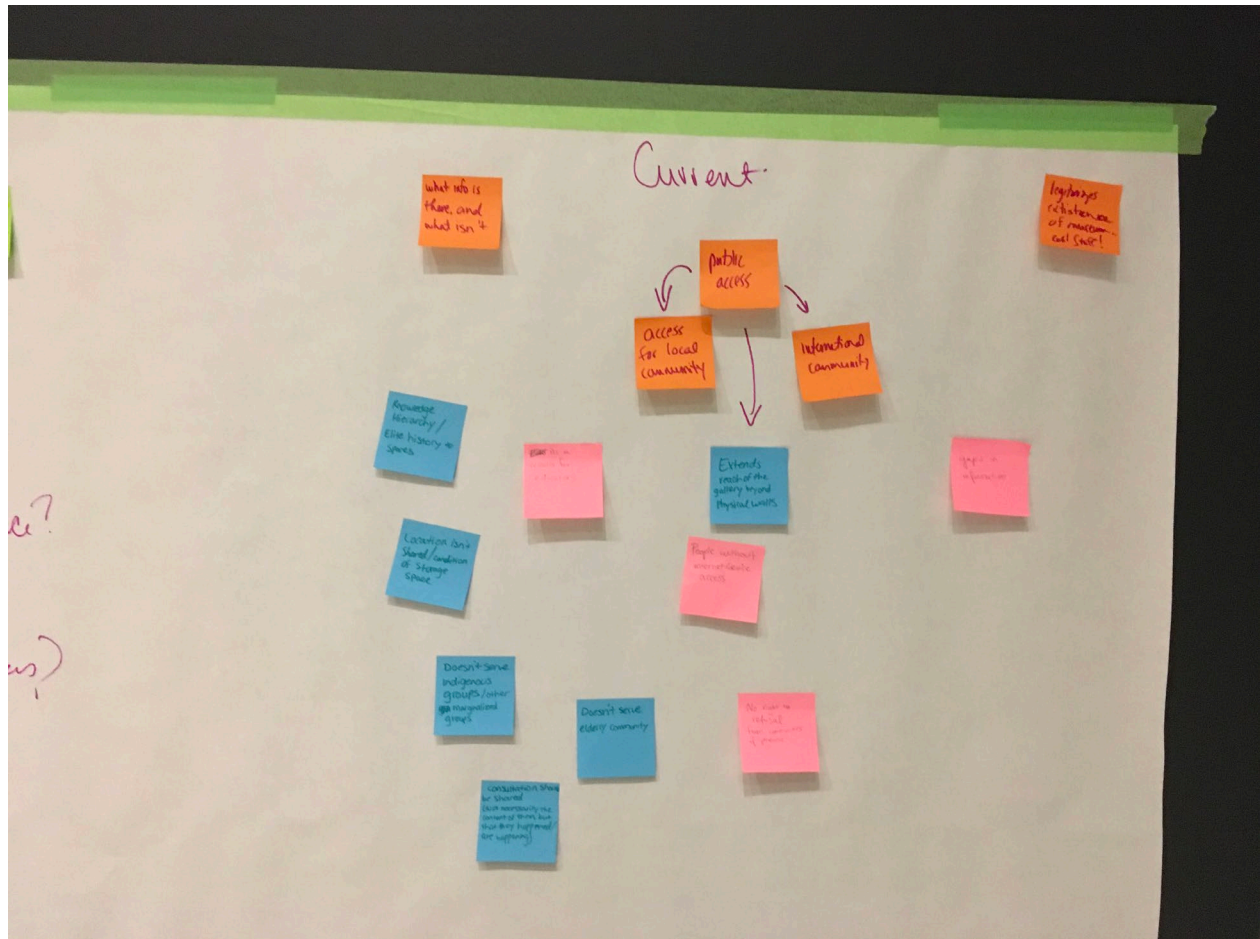
Round 2: continued



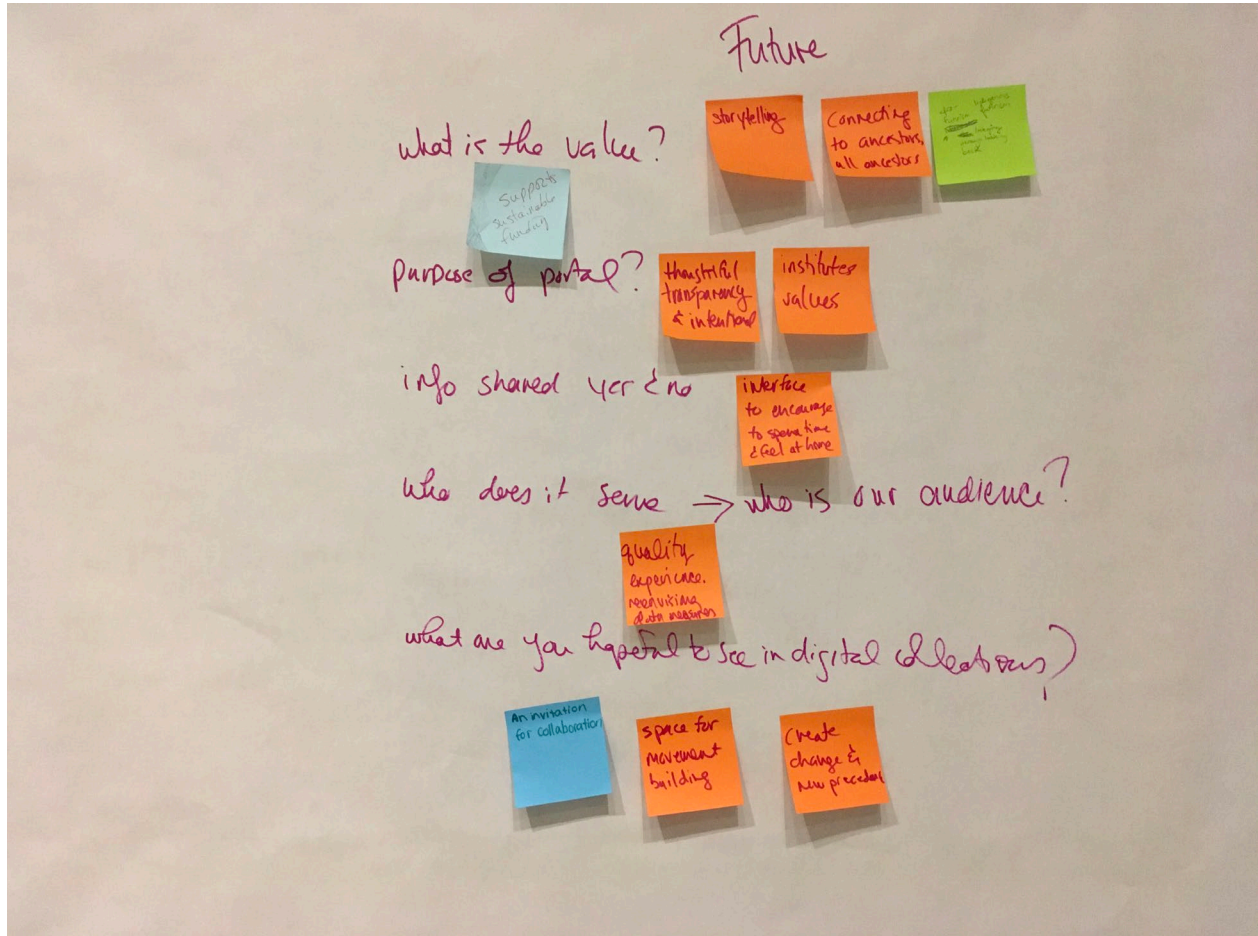
Aarati Akkapeddi, Kate Ducharme, Brandie MacDonald and Erin Messier.

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Round 1: continued



Round 2: In these questions we are speculating about the future of reimagined online museum portals. What are its values? What could be the purpose of an online collection portal? What information(s) might be shared and what shouldn't be? Who does it serve? What are you most hopeful to see in the digital presentation of collections?



Group 3

Trina Cooper-Bolam, Emily Putnam, Evan Wainio-Woldanski and Theresa Wang.

Group 3 preferred to share their responses verbally and no visual documentation is available for this group.