

January 21, 2021 Muse-ings

Intro:

As the New Year typically triggers summer internship searches, this week's Muse-ing explores the virtues of virtual internships. Anne Ciskanik, a second-year M.A. student at the University of Delaware, discusses what she learned from a summer 2020 internship that was forced to go virtual when it wasn't scheduled to be.

Piece by Anne Ciskanik:

When my internship this past summer in the Education Office at the Brandywine River Museum of Art turned virtual, I was so grateful to have the internship but also concerned I'd be missing some of the things that drew me to museums in the first place. I've always been one for hands-on learning. As a middle schooler, I volunteered at my local history museum and spent the summer in full nineteenth century dress while teaching other kids how to make butter, roll hoops, and walk on stilts. In my more recent museum work, I have continued to engage the public directly by guiding tours and running educational events. But despite my initial concerns, my virtual internship proved to be a valuable and enriching experience. Here are the four lessons I learned about making the most of a virtual internship:

1. Communication is key. I cannot stress enough the importance of consistent communication during a virtual internship. The success of my projects depended on meetings with my supervisors where they gave feedback and provided encouragement. In hindsight, my supervisors and I agreed that we should have met more at the beginning of the internship in order to nail down a description of the final project and strategically plan out the creative process and workflow. Ask to meet with your supervisors regularly and be clear about any challenges you are facing as soon as you can identify them.
2. Look for virtual networking opportunities beyond your direct supervisor. Brandywine made sure the interns had time to get to know each other, meet staff members from different departments, and join networking panels from regional institutions and universities. There are plenty of chances to connect in the virtual world right now, especially since many people are missing the in-person aspect of their work. Take the initiative if there aren't networking events built into your internship and make the most of the opportunities that are out there.
3. Embrace this chance to hone digital skills. While I did miss exploring the museum in person, I now can see how many digital skills I gained and the ways that this internship challenged me to think in less traditional ways. Working virtually, I did not simply adapt content and in-person programs to a website but instead started with the digital audience and created specific content to fit their needs. For instance, I turned the museum's collection highlights tour and into an interactive and accessible product that encourages viewers to learn at their own speed. We used the platform StoryMap JS, which incorporated a dynamic map alongside images of the paintings, an element that informed and engaged digital users but not something easily incorporated into an in-person tour.
4. Don't be too hard on yourself while working virtually. I prefer in-person workplaces, so I had to adjust to working from home this past year. It can be lonely and hard to motivate yourself at times. My biggest challenge was to overcome a sense of guilt for brief distractions or breaks from my screen. In an office, I wouldn't think twice about taking time to stretch or get a coffee, but that somehow changed when I was working virtually. Mental health is of upmost importance as we all make our way through quarantines or workplace closures, so make sure you aren't setting up unnecessary hurdles for yourself.