

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND


As the Exhibits Librarian at the University Libraries with a background in Anthropology and museum work, my current role allows me to bring museum practices into the classroom in ways I hadn't explored in previous positions. This research focuses on the impact of the Exhibit Label Writing Workshop in developing student-curators' skills in writing effective exhibit labels. The class, which began in this format in 2014 was a collaboration between University Libraries and the DU Writing Program. It incorporates museum practices such as object analysis and experiential learning. I became involved in 2021 with the introduction of the label writing workshop. During this activity, students' rough label drafts are printed and taped next to objects or reproductions, and they make their edits on the label on the wall in groups of three. By reading and editing text in the exhibit space, students take on both curator and audience perspectives, interacting with the text and objects directly.

This approach reflects a museum practice where curators and exhibit developers hang test prints in the exhibit space to refine the clarity and how it fits within the larger exhibit narrative (Hein, 2012; Falk & Dierking, 2016). Increasingly, museums also collaborate with communities, such as Native American communities, to assist in cultural accuracy and respectful representation (Lonetree, 2012; Peers & Brown, 2003). In this workshop, students participate in embodied learning by interacting with the exhibit space, gaining insight into how exhibit text and curatorial decisions influence object interpretation (Hein, 2012).

This study uses the Effective Exhibit Label Rubric and qualitative analysis of students' weekly reflections to evaluate the workshop's impact. The rubric data indicates a 17.8% improvement in label strength after the workshop, while the reflections demonstrate an increased understanding of how research informs exhibit labels.

PARTICIPATE in the Exhibit Label Writing Workshop.

Take a marker, and write your suggestions directly on the label. Focus on content—does it clearly explain the object's significance? What questions does it raise?



Women holding a "Colorado Women Are Citizens" banner
Photographer unknown
c. 1910 or 1920

Suffragettes continued campaigning for their right to vote. As you can see in the picture on the left, they created banners and traveled throughout the state. It took sixteen years for another referendum to reach the Legislature, but on the day of the popular vote, it passed 35,798 votes to 29,551 votes. Colorado was not the first state to earn the right to vote, but it was the first to do so by popular vote.

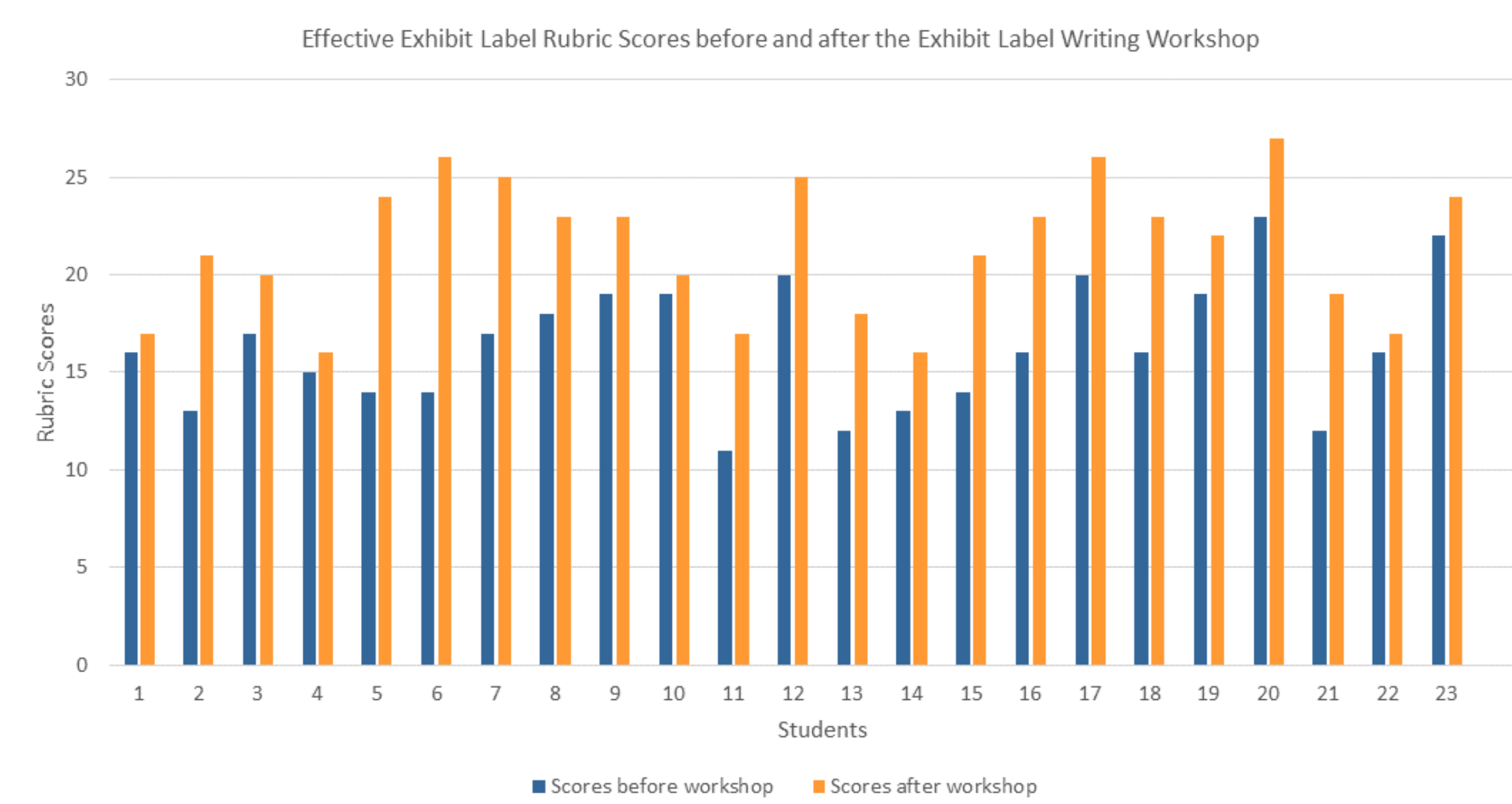
Courtesy of Denver Public Library Special Collections.

Mark directly on label or write notes here:

FINDINGS

The rubrics indicate an average label improvement of 5 points or 17.8% after the intervention of the Exhibit Label Writing Workshop. The qualitative analysis offers three findings that help to explain the improvement:

- Engagement with Peer and Instructor Feedback Leads to Improvement
 - Student 4: "This week's work was extremely helpful for me, especially being able to hear what both my peers and professors think about my work."
 - Student 9: "Once we read it out loud and did some editing on it in our groups, I realized how clunky my words sounded... and I was able to rewrite it."
- Strong Narrative Development and Artifact-Research Connection are Key
 - Student 2: "I have been struggling to connect my artifact to that broader historical context... But after working on it, I think I figured it all out."
 - Student 6: "I also needed to pull in some secondary source information, I just hadn't chosen what I wanted to use yet."
- Clarity of Direction Increases Throughout the Workshop
 - Student 4: "I was too focused on giving information that I forgot my focus... hearing the recommendations helped me understand the significance of the artifact and convey that through my label."
 - Student 19: "I didn't have much written and didn't have a direction to go in."



METHODS AND RUBRIC

This study uses a mixed-methods approach to evaluate the impact of the Exhibit Label Writing Workshop.

EFFECTIVE EXHIBIT LABEL RUBRIC (draft label)					
Title of the label you are editing: _____					
Title of your label: _____					
CATEGORY	4 - Above Standards	3 - Meets Standards	2 - Approaching Standards	1 - Below Standards	Score
Structure	The label begins with clear and engaging visual references.	The label begins with clear visual references.	The label begins with clear visual references.	There are no visual references.	
Content	There is balance between historical information and interpretation (offering perspective, provocation).	The information (presenting information or interpretation) is well-balanced.	Only information (presenting information or interpretation) is present.	There is no information or interpretation. There is only a summary of the object.	
Context	Men are clearly represented through rich descriptions and engaging questions.	There are good descriptions, but the narrative could be more engaging.	The descriptions are surface-level, and no narrative has been constructed.	Descriptions are surface-level, and no narrative has been constructed.	
Address	There are logical links to the research questions and larger context.	The links to the research questions and larger context are present but are not integrated.	The links to the research questions and larger context are present but are not integrated.	There are no links to the research questions or larger context, and the links are illogical.	
Readability	The audience's prior knowledge, interests, and assumptions are addressed.	The information in the label addresses the audience and is highly readable.	The information in the label addresses the audience, but it is not highly readable.	There is no acknowledgment of the audience.	
Writing	Men are distilled to their essence, and complex ideas are explained in simple terms.	The label is succinct and wordy, but the idea is explained clearly.	The idea is explained, but it could be more succinct.	The label is too long and the idea is not clearly explained.	
Editing	There are no unnecessary repetitions, grammatical errors, and typos.	The label is repetitive, but there are no grammatical or typographical errors.	There are unnecessary repetitions, grammatical errors, and typos.	The label is hard to read due to grammatical errors and typos.	
					TOTAL

Participants

Twenty-three students from Dr. Rob Gilmor's 2023 and 2024 WRIT 1733 courses participated.

Workshop Design

Students, working in groups of three, started by describing their research topic, then another group member read the label aloud. Together, the group assessed the label's content and clarity, making revisions based on how the label functioned alongside the object and from the audience's perspective.

Rubric Assessment

The Effective Exhibit Label Rubric assessed clarity, interpretive depth, audience engagement, and narrative flow, with a maximum score of 28 points. Labels were evaluated before and after the workshop.

Qualitative Data Collection

Qualitative data was collected through weekly student reflections. For this research, the focus was on the reflections written on the day of the workshop.

Data Analysis

Quantitative analysis, determining the differences in the scores before and after the workshop, was used to show notable gains in effectiveness. Qualitative analysis coded student reflections for themes such as peer/instructor engagement, artifact-research connection, narrative development, label structure awareness, secondary source integration, self-reflection and ownership, emotional response, and clarity of direction. These themes were linked to student experiences of confidence, frustration, excitement, stress, and growth.

Although all reflections were analyzed, special attention was given to comparing the four students with the highest rates of change and strong final scores with those who experienced the least change. The goal was to explore the factors contributing to these differences.

CONCLUSIONS

This research demonstrates that the embodied practice of physically engaging with exhibit labels in the space where they will be displayed improves their effectiveness. Drawing from theory on embodied learning (Hein, 2012), which emphasizes how learning happens through physical interaction with one's environment, the label writing workshop gave students the opportunity to stand in the role of both curator and audience. By printing draft labels (prototypes), placing them next to the objects, and revising them in situ, students engaged in a process that mimics professional curatorial work—testing the label's clarity, narrative flow, and connection to the object. This workshop encourages student-curators to think critically about how their text functions in the exhibit as a whole.

Quantitative data showed a 5-point (17.8%) average improvement in label scores, particularly in the areas of clarity, interpretive depth, and narrative strength. Qualitative analysis of student reflections revealed recurring themes such as peer/instructor feedback, artifact-research connection, and narrative development. The students who actively engaged with peer and instructor feedback, developed strong artifact-research connections, and used secondary resources to refine their narratives saw the greatest improvement.

To make the workshop more effective, an activity asking students to talk aloud in groups about their research topics earlier in the research phase could help prepare them by clarifying their direction and solidifying their understanding before they begin drafting their labels. By encouraging students to develop stronger artifact-research connections earlier, we can reduce the uncertainty many feel when they start writing.

In conclusion, this research highlights how embodied learning—through physical interaction with exhibit materials and space—enhances student-curators' abilities to write effective labels. These practices could be applied beyond exhibit label writing, offering a model for integrating museum practices into the classroom to foster more engaging and reflective learning experiences in other fields.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

In future research, I would like to investigate the potential connection between emotional investment, ownership, and continued student engagement in the classroom. I think that students who feel a strong sense of ownership over their work could be more likely to stay invested in the course as it progresses, leading to fewer grade drop-offs and higher attendance. Studies in educational psychology, such as those by Meyer and Turner (2006), suggest that emotional engagement plays a role in sustained motivation and performance.

I would like to track student engagement and performance from the midpoint of the quarter through to the final weeks of the class, comparing assignment completion, attendance, and final grades. The goal would be to see if ownership could lead to greater commitment when faced with the pressures of deadlines and course demands. If there is a connection, it could offer new insights into strategies for reducing disengagement in students at the end of the quarter.

Additionally, this emotional investment could lead to the skills of concise public writing being used by students throughout their education and maybe even into their careers. Research by Dweck (2006) on growth mindset suggests that students who feel a personal connection to their learning tasks are more likely to see these tasks as valuable, which could help them carry skills learned in the workshop into future academic and professional writing. I would like to conduct follow-up studies to track how students who exhibit strong emotional ownership during the workshop might integrate these writing skills into later writings.

Researching these potential links, specifically in the context of assigning exhibits as final projects, could lead to a better understanding of how emotional investment can contribute to long-term skill development and career readiness.

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