

Hidden Lessons



POWERHOUSE

Project Overview

Hidden Lessons was a student-led, pedagogical project created on Darug Country in Greater Western Sydney, Australia. Over six months in 2022, young people (14–16 years) from Our Lady of Mercy College engaged with objects of everyday life from the Powerhouse collection. Powerhouse is Australia's leading applied arts and sciences museum. In responding to museum objects that reflect histories of education, learners interrogated three pillars of their own educational experience: **who we learn with, where we learn, and what we learn with.**

In the wake of COVID-19, and amid significant changes to education and learning practices, this project encouraged reflection about the present moment, and our speculative future. Through exercises across live and digital spheres that spanned mapping, weaving, personal archiving, collecting, zine making, and rearranging classrooms, the young people developed methods for radical and collaborative thinking that pushed the edges of how we teach and how we learn.

Arising from the collective knowledge generated in the sessions together, **the learners created their own 'Museum of Hidden Lessons'**. Housed in a temporary structure, a canvas tent, this museum was erected first on the ground of Our Lady of Mercy College Parramatta, and later at Powerhouse Castle Hill, alongside a display of Powerhouse collection objects examined through the project. **As 'caretakers' of the museum, learners were encouraged to share the project with their peers and school community**, by inviting them into the tent and engaging in reciprocal knowledge exchange rooted in dialogical and material practices.



Project Outline

Date	Location	Guiding Theme	Guiding Question	Grounding Objects
30 July	Powerhouse Castle Hill Galleries and lawn	Welcoming	What 'hidden lessons' are embedded within the Powerhouse collection of modern education?	– <i>Bilum</i> (string bag) – Mat
3 August	Online	Hybridity	How can we play within an online meeting to explore the materiality of digital space?	– Military slide rule, 'Range Taking Mk I'
18 August	Powerhouse Castle Hill Stores	Collecting	What might we learn about learning through engaging with the Powerhouse collection?	– All
6 September	Our Lady of Mercy College Parramatta Playground	Building	What kinds of informal learning and sharing occurs when a 'Tent Museum' is installed on school grounds?	– Tent
7 September	Our Lady of Mercy College, Parramatta Classroom	Flexibility	How can we empower learners to reconfigure learning spaces to best suit their needs?	– 'Integra' chairs – Slide rule, model 52/80
12 October	Our Lady of Mercy College, Parramatta Tent Museum and classroom	Radical	How does the creation of artefacts for our 'Tent Museum' question current museological and collecting practices?	– 'Integra' chairs – Slide rule, model 52/80 – Mat
20 October	Powerhouse Castle Hill Stores	Returning	What might Powerhouse learn about the impact of collection objects by engaging with young people in the process?	– All
2 November	Our Lady of Mercy College, Parramatta Tent Museum and classroom	Relations	How do we prioritise 'relation' and 'relationality' as the guiding force(s) of our project?	– Learning from home pack – 'The Circle of Knowledge'
26 November	Powerhouse Castle Hill Lawn	Welcoming	How do we welcome others in and share our practice with the public?	– All

Questions from the Learners

- 1 What can I contribute? What role will I play?
- 2 What are the hidden or known meanings of artefacts?
- 3 How do we question our perspectives on the history of education?
- 4 Who is this history for? What is its purpose?
- 5 How do we question the complexities of the lockdown narrative?
- 6 How do we question why we think certain ways or are taught certain ways? How do we know that these ways are correct or most accurate?
- 7 How are we able to convey the stories, work, and histories of people in a way that is respectful and considerate? Because there have been so many cases where people haven't done so
- 8 How do we put together an exhibition?
- 9 How do we decide which objects and artefacts should be included for display?
- 10 Am I the only one having a spiritual experience of this?

Shared Findings

- Acknowledging the classroom as artwork, and people as material enables a complex reimagining of our spatial, relational and societal dynamics.
- The needs of the human body must be met. Comfort is important for effective learning. Snacks are essential!
- Intergenerational gathering is essential to the way we live and learn.
- The locus of power shifts depending on the activity – sometimes teacher, sometimes individual student, sometimes shared.
- It takes time to empower learners to recognise their agency. Saying 'you have control over this space' is not the same as empowering learners to act on that very statement.
- We can create endless versions of 'flexible classrooms' and 'flexible furnitures' but without the impetus to disrupt architectures, satiate the needs of diverse learners, relinquish control and welcome surprise – the efforts are redundant.
- Patterns of experience can be disrupted with interesting results – moving spaces for each workshop unlocks different thinking.
- Challenges and benefits exist in both home-based and school-based learning Collective discussion builds mutuality, and reflection on how to keep the good bits and re-work the bad.
- Enabling dialogue to flow through the material (weaving) unlocks freedoms in negotiation, conversation and connectivity; resulting in reciprocal learning opportunities and slippery exchanges.
- Often, very quiet students can find their voice when they have an object or task to orient themselves towards.
- Learners are overscheduled, pressured and stressed. They expressed pleasure in being given space to seek and exchange knowledge freely, through activities that were not assessable, and had no 'right' answer.



Sample Exercises

Exercise 1:

Gathering(s) take flight

Materials

A4 paper, pens or pencils. This is a collective mind mapping activity for a group of learners

Steps

- Seat a group of learners in a circle. Each person has a piece of paper and a pencil.
- Give the group a question, or provocation.
- Each person must write (or draw) something within 10 seconds that relates to the provocation.
- Then, they pass their paper to the person to the left.
- Repeat until the pages are filled, or the minds are exhausted.
- Observe your collective mind maps. Comment on commonalities, repeated ideas, unusual connections.
- Fold the mind maps into paper planes.
- Climb to a high place.
- Launch them into the air.
- Allow your gathering(s) to take flight!

Suggested provocations

Where do we learn?

What do we learn with?

Who do we learn with?



Exercise 2:

How to use a classroom

Materials

Butchers paper, pens, smart phone cameras, a classroom, classroom furniture, a group of approximately 20 learners.

Steps

Enter a classroom. Observe the objects, furniture, materials, surfaces, and space. If you regularly use this classroom, share personal reflections on the way it is generally used. Share as many observations as possible.

Now discuss:

How do classroom environments shape the way we learn?

Who chooses how the space is set up?

How frequently are the classroom layouts changed, tested, reshaped?

What implicit, or explicit power structures exist in the space?

Divide the group into three teams:

Actors

This group must work together to rearrange the room. They can be as creative and ridiculous as they like – think stacked chairs, inverted tables. Then, they must occupy the new configurations with their bodies in unusual ways. Repeat three times in the space of 10 minutes.

Photographers

Using smart phones, this group must document the mayhem through the following themes: action, close-up, bodies, space and shape. Focus on taking a variety of shots from a variety of angles. Get down low, or up high. Get extreme closeups. Capture the whole scene, from a variety of perspectives.

Scribes

With butcher's paper and pens, this group must document all they see and hear. Think lines, drawings and diagrams that capture movement, sound and configurations. Comments, questions, and conversations might be jotted down in words and notes.

Rotate the groups until all learners have had a turn in each team.

Extended activity

The material generated by the photographers and scribes makes excellent content for a subsequent zine-making workshop.

Mapped Reflections

Slide Rule

Such a curious object

You need lessons to learn how to use the slide rule – it is a complex machine. Not as accessible as your everyday calculator. Yet, it offers something else. The ability to visualise and imagine numbers in relation. The math isn't hidden. It is visible. It is alive. It becomes embodied through the act of interacting with the numbers.

I am terrible at math.

I probably could never use a slide rule, but, I love the idea that a tool like the slide rule could enable me to become more conceptual and abstracted in my thinking with and through numbers.

Generational changes

Talking to Matthew Connell about the slide rules – he is of an age where he remembers the slide rule's decline in use after the calculator came out. This is a big shift in the way mathematical knowledge was taught, within living memory. The OLMC students, when they are Matthew's age, will be able to reflect on similar changes in technology we are experiencing now. What will be the impact of these changes?

TAMMI/TAMMI/TAMMI

The energy of bringing archives to life. Before knowing Tammi was a dancer, it was felt. Her ability to bring what are often thought of as 'static' objects to life with the body was = power. She made me question the ways that we think of collections and archives and excited by the potential of bringing this bodily activation to learners.

TEMPORARY ARCHITECTURES

Flexible learning

Flexible classroom

Who decides what goes where?

Is it ever changed?

Probably not...

Why not?

Our informal chats with the educators at OLMC are so wild and curious — it appears that many (all) educators have strong feelings about how classrooms should be set-up... what furniture should be part of a classroom set up...

The politics of stackable chairs vs wheely chairs

Stackable chairs use less space, but require lifting. Wheely chairs take up a lot of space, but require no lifting – they asked to be moved, to dance, to explore the edges of space

The irony of course if that they are never wheeled anywhere new Is it that it's too hard?

Takes too long?

We're unsure where to reposition them?

Why don't we ask the learners?

How would you like your classroom – your space to be set?

And so, this is what we did

The Carrier Bag

Talking and walking with Tammi in the museum archives, looking at the bilum, linking it to the Ursula le Guin essay, which talks about the first cultural technology being a carrier bag. Right after we looked at this object we looked at the learning from home pack and notes the tote bag that the materials came in.

Learning with objects

Lesson 1: I remember a student reflecting on how 'alluring' the Victorian era is through objects. She reflected on her curiosity of this period.

What would it be like to be there?

Live there? Learn there?

Part of that reflection involved the reflection on being 'other' in a predominately white environment and led to further questioning — maybe this place is now for me? Would I be excluded, ostracised? How far have we come in the 21st century!

OUR OBJECTS/OUR ARCHIVES

The activity we did early on, where we asked the learners to share an item from their own life that was exhibiting signs of wear, has really stuck with me. I find myself looking at objects all around me now, especially ones that are 'new', and thinking "this too will soon be old."

Hybrid hiccups

I feel like our least successful... on zoom. This wasn't so much an unexpected fact that the girls though they were using laptops there. Hybrid environments (where some are in physical space) created. It made it very hard to get the Some of the exercises fell flat. more in this one than the learn

Hidden Lessons

Hidden as metaphor uncovering lost stories on access and permission

Lessons as learnings from each other, from from object

Politics of space

We enter the museum and year groups flow, year 9, 10 and 11 intermingled — occupying the same space.

We enter the school yard the deeply embedded rules and invisible structures emerge - without warning. Without noticing. Year 8 and Year 9 on the right and year 10 and year 11 on the left. The left is loud, vocal and excited. The right - they are quiet, they give space to those that are 'older'

It is fascinating how space directs, instructs and tells us how to be, how to act

PRESENCE

I am writing this from overseas, and finding it so hard to feel connected. This is making me reflect a lot on the importance of presence with other people. The technologies we have that enable remote connection are incredible and are growing fast. But there is still nothing that equates to being in the same room as people.

session was the one we tried to do
our fault but was a result of the
were all in a room together (even
ps) and we were the only ones not
where people are in digital space and
created very ruptured communication.
flow, or feel connected with them.
I think maybe we as educators learnt
ers did.

SLIDING/WALKING

I also wonder how my understanding of maths would have been shaped if I had learnt with this more spatial devices.

I always remember things better when they are placed in space.

It makes me think of some comments Tammi made about learning by walking through country, about how knowledge is embedded in landscape.

Museum at school

Museum of Hidden Lessons as catalyst — Students creating their own museums inspired by the pop up Museum on school grounds. The most brilliant take away from a student-led project that ripples outward. What happens when learners question museological practices and the politics of collections. When they take agency and ownership and build their very own that reflects their lives and their existence.

SLIDING/SLIDING/SLIDING

I will always remember the difficulty Matthew had pulling out the large slide rule to show us. The fact that this is such an unwieldy object was so perfectly apt for the comparisons we were making to the convenient, handheld devices we have today.

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n Country, from site,

Recognising our felt connection with objects through our inability to divorce ourselves from them (even for just a brief moment in time)

I am surprised that some learners are unable to offer their objects from home to the collection and prefer to share a photograph of the object, due to their reliance on the object in their space and their world.

This is an interesting learning and hopefully something they will reflect on.

Why do we feel so connected to these things?

Stories in objects

It has been fascinating to hear the learners describe objects from their own personal lives, then very intuitively use this to spark speculation on the lives that surrounded objects in the museum collection.

Creating our own collection

Challenging museological 'collecting' practices by generating 'purpose-built' and intentional objects and communicative tools

Bringing it back to the body

Everything comes back to the body

The objects we make, have made, will make

The spaces we construct, gather in, learn in

We understand them through the body. It is our primary learning tool. Activities where we used our bodies to do research were satisfying. Watching the girls re-arrange the classroom, crawl under tables, stand on chairs. Being physically disruptive, taking up space, moving ideas around

Sharing curatorial practice

What happens where you place two objects side-by-side?

What are the politics embedded in arrangement?

What new stories can be built, heard, seen, proposed?

Feminist Layering

- Thinking back to early discussions we had with Matt about the nuns at OLMC. How they were quite radical in some ways, and very progressive in the types of education they championed.
- Thinking about changes in what sorts of topics women were allowed or expected to study
- This relates to that object at MAAS, the sewing instruction board. It instructs for a type of education that was more vocationally driven
- The First Nations objects we have looked at are also both women's objects. Talking with Tammi about the ways they would have been used, and women's cultural roles, the way teaching and knowledge is passed and shared, enriched these Feminist underpinnings
- It feels really potent working on this project with this group of young women

LEARNING ABOUT CONNECTION

What have I learned about relational practice through this project?

Building and maintaining a relationship with a group over a long period of time can be tricky, but each session can also be treated as a unique opportunity for connection.

When participants gift you openness and flexibility, and the willingness to work speculatively, this is hugely valuable and must be nurtured in whatever ways possible.

In collaboration, a conversation is worth ten emails.

Acknowledgement of Country

Powerhouse acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the ancestral homelands upon which our museums are situated. We respect their Elders, past, present and future and recognise their continuous connection to Country.

Participants

The Hidden Lessons project was developed and led by Lleah Smith, Artistic Associate, Powerhouse in collaboration with Nadia Odum, Artist in Residence, Parramatta Artists' Studios. The project and its Museum of Hidden Lessons was realised with learners and teachers from Our Lady of Mercy College Parramatta.

Learners

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Jennifer Wang

Teachers

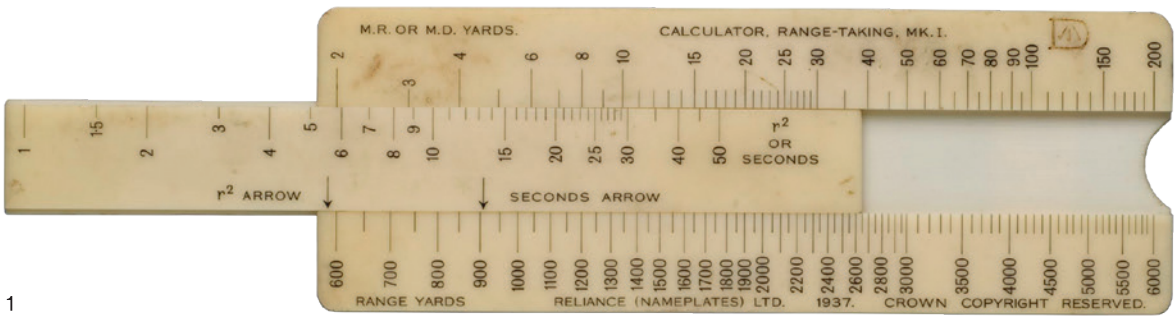
Matthew Esterman, Director of Innovation and Partnerships
Ben Walsh, Head of Department, History/HSIE

With special thanks to the learners at Our Lady of Mercy College (OLMC) Parramatta for their incredible dedication to the process and willingness to embrace surprises. Matthew Esterman (Director of Innovation and Partnerships, OLMC) for his ongoing enthusiasm and support throughout the entirety of the project. Nikki Brogan (Programs Producer, Powerhouse) for her brilliant coordination, Tammi Gissell (Collection Coordinator, First Nations, Powerhouse) for being so generous with her time and her knowledge, Nina Earl (Assistant Curator, Powerhouse) for her keenness to reimagine museum display practice in collaboration with us and the learners and Lisa Ffrench (Director, Strategic Projects, Powerhouse) for welcoming us in and valuing the process.

Images

1. Military slide rule, 'Range Taking Mk I', plastic, made by Reliance (Name Plates) Ltd, England, 1937. Used by the Australian Army.
2. Didactic display of school sewing samples, framed, cotton / wood / glass, unknown maker, made in Australia, about 1900.
3. 'Integra' chairs (4), stackable, moulded polypropylene, designed by Charles Furey & Associates for Sebel Ltd, made by Sebel Ltd, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia, 1973–86.
4. Slide rule with packaging and instructions, model 52/80, plastic / paper, made by Faber-Castell, Germany, 1965.
5. 'The Circle of Knowledge', board game with rule book, hand coloured, paper / linen, J Passmore, London, England, about 1851.
6. Mat, woven pandanus fibre, natural dyes, woven by Elizabeth Djuttara, Ramingining, Arnhem Land, Northern Territory, Australia, 1993.
7. 'Beginning to Read', children's schoolbook, paper / ink / metal, written by E R Boyce, illustrated by Gilbert Dunlop, published by Macmillan and Company Ltd, London, England, printed by Jarrold & Sons Ltd, Norwich, England, used by Randwick Public School, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia, 1955.
8. Learning from Home Pack, issued to Year 2 students of Auburn North Public School during COVID-19, paper / cotton / plastic / wood / metal / synthetic, compiled by teachers of Auburn North Public School, Auburn, New South Wales, Australia, March 2020. Gift of Auburn North Public School, 2020
9. Placard, 'Activism Is Learning' / 'Stop The Boasts', double-sided, cardboard / acrylic, made by Tracy Allen, Springwood, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia, used at the Sydney Climate Strike, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia, 20 September 2019.
10. *Bilum* (string bag), handwoven polyester fibre and wool, attributed to makers of the Eastern Highlands Province, Papua New Guinea, 1970–75.





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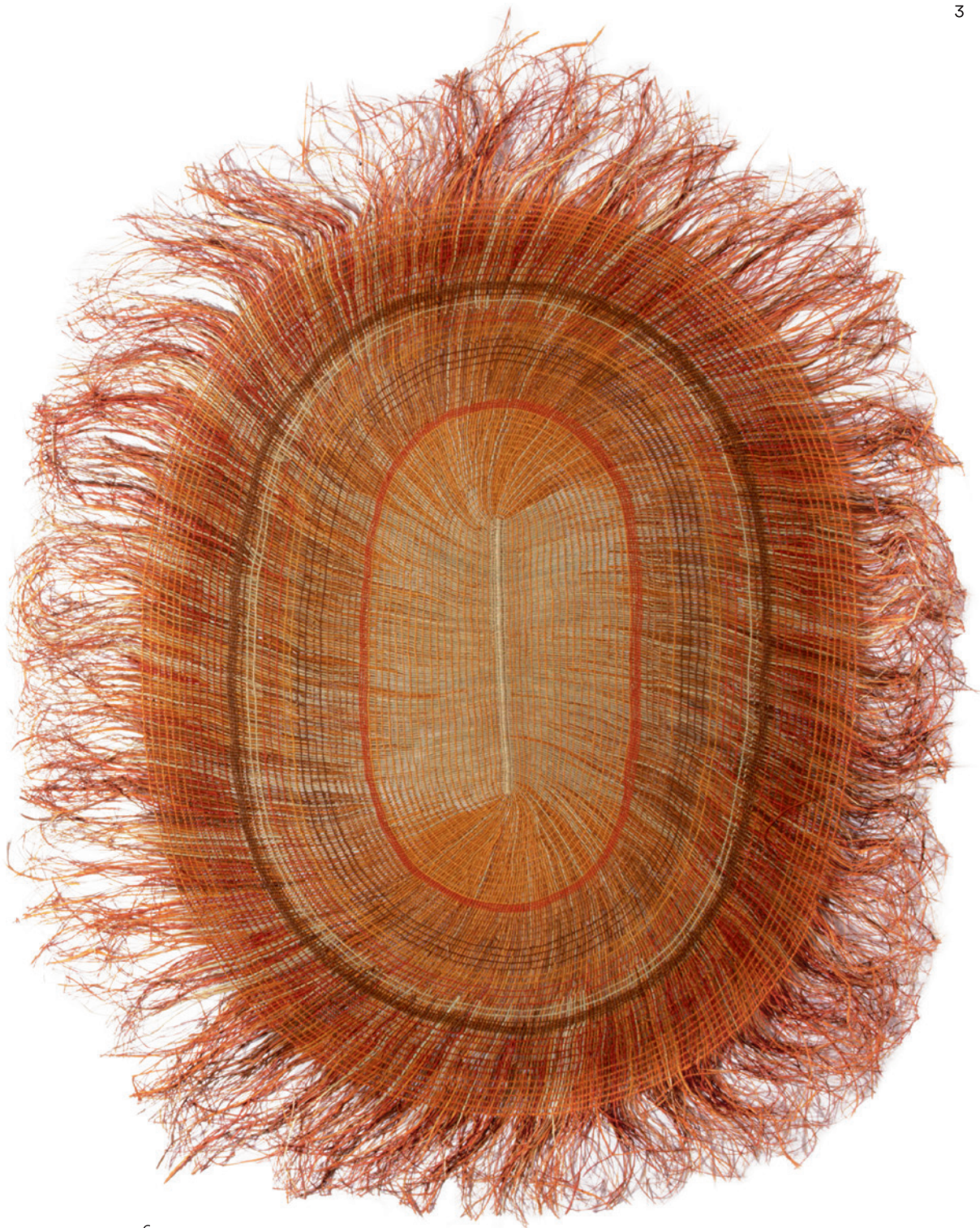
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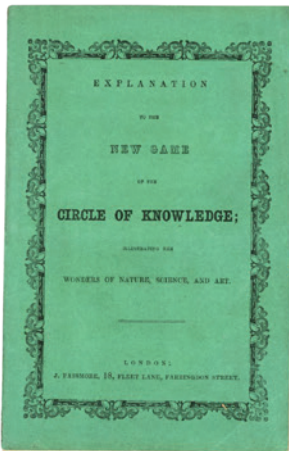
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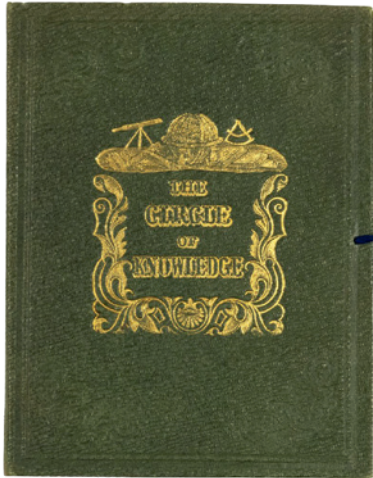
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