The Value of Museum Learning in Higher Education

Dr Carrie Winstanley

University of Roehampton
c.winstanley@roehampton.ac.uk
Note: I am using the museology convention of adopting the word ‘museum’ to mean a range of places generally accessed by public visitors for leisure and ‘free choice learning’. These include, but are not limited to: museums, galleries, aquaria, publicly accessible libraries and archives, parks and outdoor wildlife and educational centres, heritage sites and monuments. University museums are a different case as they are closely linked to the institution and can (in theory) be more responsive to student needs.

Within the field of museum education, the least examined group in visitor studies seems to be that of Higher Education (HE) students (Falk and Dierking, 2000: Black, 2005: Harland and Kinder, 2007; Hein, 1998; Hooper-Greenhill, 2004, etc). Within this research exists a focus on the nature and use of the museum or gallery collections, often linked to subject areas such as anthropology, art, geology, design and history for example, that require direct engagement with specialist primary sources (Boddington et al, 2013). The use of museums for HE students who do not have a clear link to the museum collection is less frequently discussed. This is understandable, but there are still benefits to be derived from such visits.

This workshop is designed to consider the possible positive impact of learning in museums for HE students in these instances. Two main issues will be considered: the museum space; and, learning in the museum. It is hoped that some images of students engaged in visits and some practical exemplars will help the audience to connect with the ideas being discussed and to share their own relevant experiences as learners and / or HE teachers.

Museum spaces

It is interesting to try and reconsider some of the assumptions around what students want from museums. Rather than focusing on linking artefacts directly to topics of study, there could be some value in ‘just being’ in the museum space. It could be argued that all museums are spaces for learning in as much as they are collections open to visitors with some level of interpretation from ‘experts’. The interested novice visits, engages and explores, learning all the while, regardless of the layout, building style or labelling. However, some museums appear to make deliberative attempts to be conducive to learning, whilst some are more focused on other matters.

Within the field of research on the design of museum spaces, current debates are around the relationship between architecture and visitors; recent studies of visitor behaviour have informed changes in museum design (Foster, 2001, 2002; Shiner, 2011). At best, museum spaces can encourage reflection and engagement, but in some instances, they can hinder learning when form overshadows function, relegating the collection and visitor experience to an afterthought at the expense of a dramatic building. This is pertinent because educators welcoming learners to a museum need to be mindful of the impact of the space in which the learning is to be facilitated.

Considering entrances and lobby spaces is a good way of exemplifying this influence. A key factor in setting the tone of any group activity is how the session opens; being in the right frame of mind helps visitors to be receptive to learning. Transitional spaces, such as doorways and lobbies affect the mood of people and their consequent readiness to learn, as well influencing the group’s propensity to socialise during their time in the museum. In the discursive space of the museum, the traditional lecture of seminar format is destabilised affording the tutor to establish a different kind of learning space (anon, 2013). Students often
report feeling worried about entering very opulent or grand buildings and so re-routing the group to meet at a more familiar-feeling entrance is a useful tactic. Interestingly, this is less of an issue with children (Renaissance North West 2007:19).

Knudsen et al find that entrances, are both symbolic and functional:

... the lobby is a special space as it, at the same time performs both as “museum” and “not-museum.” It is “museum” because it is part of the building that houses the exhibition and “not museum,” because it is not part of the exhibition. It is a transition zone which links the exhibition with the surrounding world, and as such it plays an important, but overlooked function (cf. Carlsson & Ågren 1982).’ (Knudsen et al, 2012:1)

So, the workshop presentation will consider the link between the setting and the group’s learning.

**Students learning and teachers teaching**

Where students are encouraged to attend, they tend to be treated as apprentice or professional researchers, with assumptions made about them already being convinced of the value of the museum and feeling confident in using the resources. However, an increase in widening participation students has resulted in many first generation university students who do not always have much experience in museums, leading to mistrust, misunderstandings, apathy and in some cases even fear. Adult visitors come with diverse experiences that impact on how they encounter collections. Counter-intuitively it seems that many students prefer to be led on a visit (anon, 2013) and this is not only true for the less experienced students. Whilst myriad papers and projects on school teachers working in museums exist, little research has been published on the role of the tutor in HE (Boddington, et al, 2013).

HE tutors are not necessarily experts in interpreting collections, or on learning in the different context of the museum. It is not always obvious how much direction and support students need to make the most of what they are seeing and experiencing and how best to connect the visits to assessed work. Is it enough, for example, to send the group on a visit and write a reflective piece?

For example, one of the perennial debates in museum education is about ‘edutainment’; that is getting the right balance between educational value and immediate enjoyment (Hein, 2000). Ansbacher (1998) showed how Dewey, in ‘Experience and Education’ (1938/1997), wrestled with this issue, discussing both ‘lasting value and agreeableness’ (p.42-3). He considered it a false dichotomy more than seventy years ago. ‘Dewey does not see any conflict between an enjoyable and an educative experience’ argues Ansbacher (ibid: 43), although he notes that Dewey does warn against enjoyable activities that are not coherently linked, those that or result in mis-education. Dewey acknowledged that the central problem ‘of an education based upon experience is to select the kind of present experiences that live fruitfully and creatively in subsequent experiences’ (1938: 27) and he expected the people designing the learning tasks and learning environments to tackle this issue.

The depth of influence of the experience (Dewey’s concept of ‘continuity’) is largely up to the way in which the teacher helps the students to link the learning to their broader work context.
By getting to know the group of students well, this is easier to accomplish effectively. It still may be valuable, however, to provide more research-based support for HE tutors working with groups in museums to help them optimise learning.

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References


Anonymised reference: