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Adult Visitors In Museum Learning Environments

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Abstract

Although contemporary arts are considered an excellent way for museumgoers to practise the process of meaning-making, these processes are often hampered by visitors' difficulties with equivocal interpretations and the heterogeneity of the museum public. In order to design and provide qualitative educational tools, more insights are needed to tackle these barriers. This paper reports on two related studies examining the development and use of educational tools from both the visitor and the museum educator perspective. Besides considering eight variables of influence and different degrees of difficulty and profundity in their educational tools, art museums must reckon with the perceptibility of educational tools to target new audiences or sustain audience loyalty.

1. Introduction

Constructivist learning approaches are prevalent in contemporary museum learning research (Hein, 1998). Museum learning has become an active process in which visitors construct their personal meanings (Hooper-Greenhill, 1999; Silverman, 1995). Contemporary arts in particularly are considered an excellent way for visitors to practise the process of meaning-making. Since the middle of the nineteenth-century, artists started expressing their own messages in their unique styles and art was no longer considered a reflection of one particular community (Bernasconi, 1987; Elias, 2005). An artwork has become a sign without any fixed meaning. Through this open-

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ended character viewers complete an artwork by interpreting it. Rather than the meaning in itself, the process to come to meaning has become important (Eco, 1989). Considering the growing attention to the complex process of meaning-making, several researchers (e.g., Aguirre, 2004; Efland, 1990) emphasized the importance to support visitors in the construction of their meanings. Nevertheless, two hindrances to facilitate such processes are prevalent in the museological context. A first barrier is the difficulty with equivocal interpretations from the perspective of the visitor. Because the artwork's content and appearance often differ from what museumgoers are familiar with, beholding contemporary art became both alienating and incomprehensible to some viewers (Lankford & Scheffer, 2004; Mathewson, 2006; Rice, 1997). Although museum visitors often expect to be able to readily understand everything in the art museum without any prior know-how (Rice, 1997), they may experience difficulties in dealing with multiple or oppositional meanings as a result of the open-ended character of contemporary art (Eco, 1989). The non-hierarchical interpretive strategies underline scholarly disagreement, ambiguity, or ambivalence of meaning, which often result in confusion, resistance, and sometimes frustration. These negative experiences often decrease the odds of visiting museums again in the future (Burnham & Kai-Kee, 2011; Elias, 2005; Hooper-Greenhill, 1994; Rice, 1997). A second barrier, on the level of the museum educator, is the heterogeneity of the museum public which often results in a focus on the already informed audience (Csikszentmihalyi & Hermanson, 1995; Deeth, 2012; Screven, 2004). Learning processes, including museum learning, occur in different ways at learners' own pace and direction (Wright, 2006). Understanding the public's interests and concerns, likes and dislikes, needs and desires, is of critical importance in supplying supportive facilities, differential approaches and ultimately developing effective museums (Ambrose & Paine, 2006). However, resistance against meeting visitors' needs and interests still exists, particularly among those primarily emphasizing the scholarship and collections of museums (McLean, 2004). In addition, it is argued that there is a lack of theoretical base to guide practice regarding adult education in museums and to conduct museum audience research to identify visitors' needs (AAM, 1984; Kelly, 2004; Monk, 2013). Compared to non-art museums, considerably less research (e.g., about visitors or innovative approaches) has been conducted inside art museums (McLean, 2004) resulting in very little hard evidence that might lead to changes in curatorial behaviour in favour of the audience. Moreover, art museum management does not prioritize research output, because they neither have been trained to value it, nor are committed to take the appropriate actions (Wright, 2006).

2. The rise of the visitor

From a historical perspective, efforts to support audiences in art meaning-making have been ancillary to the collection itself for ages (Brown & Ratzkin, 2011). At the turn of the twentieth century, art museums were still new and bewildering to the ordinary visitor wandering aimlessly through the museum halls, looking at art without knowing how to study it (Kai-Kee, 2011, p. 19). It was principally assumed that visitors would automatically value and benefit from the exhibitions (Anderson, 1994). Although interpretive devices (e.g., labels, brochures, and lectures) became common practice in museum rooms, their content was initially based on dates, places and facts only (Roberts, 2004). However, for the first time museum staff members started to be charged to provide information to visitors and gallery teaching quickly became successful (Kai-Kee, 2011). Gradually attention for museum visitors increased via visitor studies like Benjamin Ives Gilman's pioneering audience research about museum fatigue (1916). In the course of the twentieth century audience research improved in number and quality, and shifted its focus in parallel to many drastic changes in educational theory (Anderson, 2004; De Backer et al., 2013; Hein, 1998; Screven, 2004). Despite this expansion of research, the main priority remained on collections and scholarly research with a focus on knowledgeable rather than inexperienced audiences (Screven, 2004). Consequently, after almost a century of rather remote links between the art museum and their visitors, the biggest challenge at present is building closer and more qualitative relationships with (potential) visitors to enhance multiple long-term benefits (Ambrose & Paine, 2006; Doering, 1999; Hein & Alexander, 1998; Hooper-Greenhill, 2001). Simon (2010) points to the front line as most effective place to start this process because of their publicly accessibility and immediate understanding of visitors' needs. Fuelled by social media, museumgoers nowadays tend to expect involvement and more (inter)active, interconnected, participatory experiences in their interaction with museums (Ambrose & Paine, 2006; Brown & Ratzkin, 2011). Museum evaluations are no more solely focused on cognitive results, but also pay attention to affective-emotional output. Research showed that museums succeed in