Interactive Learning in Museums of Art and Design
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'Interactivity and Social Inclusion'

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Think of a time when you have felt excluded or alienated in a public space.

- What was the situation?
- How did it make you feel?
- How could the situation have been different to make you feel included?

As museum professionals we are not well placed to understand the feeling of being
excluded from museums, because of our professional interest, knowledge and
experience. Yet understanding this is an important step in meeting the needs of those
who are socially excluded. This paper will focus on the relationship between
interactivity and social inclusion. What significance does interactivity have for
meeting the challenges of the social inclusion agenda?

We need to begin with a broader context for this. Despite growing support and
interest in the social role of the museum, there remains among some museum
practitioners and commentators a marked reluctance to take seriously the notion that
cultural organizations can or should engage with social issues. As institutions,
museums are well placed to maintain and sustain traditions. Their functions of
collecting, preserving and documenting the past have, I would suggest, tended to
make them introverted, highly focused on past societies, past practices and past
beliefs. Whether intentionally or not, many museums have operated a policy of
passive exclusion. Traditional fine and decorative art museums have been among
those most reluctant to embrace this notion that they exclude many visitors and
potential visitors. Moreover, little consideration has been given to the multiple
barriers that exist to people accessing these collections.

Art and design museums works well for those who speak the right language, for
people who understand the right codes; these museums are well used by those who
find connections between their lives and the museum and its collections. So for
members of the National Association of Decorative and Fine Art Societies
(NADFAS) the traditional art and design museum is logical, accessible and relevant.
They are what E. Wenger would describe as a 'community of practice', identifying
with the knowledge, the language, the value system that underpins the gallery.
Moreover, the physical space of the gallery acts to reinforce the shared
understandings of the community of practice.

However, many people find no connections, no relevance. They see serried rows of
precious objects unfathomably presented, with text that presupposes considerable
knowledge and provides a very hands-off and alienating experience. So the traditional

approach to museum interpretation works well for one community but fails to engage or connect with many other people.

The museum is a space for many diverse people who view the world in different ways, whose previous experiences may be very different. The challenge is to create an environment where many needs are met. Here the curator's expertise in the collections together with knowledge about the visitor and the potential visitor, gained through audience research and outreach activities, will inform the interpretive strategy for the gallery. But fundamental is the ethos of creating a space that is inclusive, that begins to meet the challenges of the inclusion agenda. Within this overview interactive design elements are among the many tools available to create a different space, a different experience.

But what is the extent of the challenge? What do we mean by 'social exclusion'?

'Social exclusion' as a term first emerged in France in the 1970s, as a concept for understanding disadvantage and inequality. It has grown in importance and usage in many arenas, replacing earlier concepts of poverty and marginalization. The UK government describes it is as 'a shorthand term for what can happen when people or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime environments, bad health, poverty and family breakdown' (Social Exclusion Unit, Cabinet Office). The key to social exclusion is its multi-dimensional and interrelated nature: low educational attainment may lead in later life to low income, which in turn may lead to poor housing and poor health, all of which in time can lead to political, social and cultural exclusion.

With a greater recognition of the multi-dimensional and interrelated nature of disadvantage the responsibility for developing and implementing solutions is equally widened. What role might museums play in combating exclusion or promoting inclusion? In relation to the cultural dimension of exclusion it is relatively straightforward to position the role of museums and galleries. Most have seen it as being synonymous with widening access to their services for groups that are under-represented in their visitor profiles. However, there are some other important approaches for museums. For some museums and galleries, culture, the arts and heritage are not intrinsically valuable; rather, their value exists in relation to people – individuals, communities and wider society. They may therefore articulate these values and beliefs in mission statements or project aims. Examples include museums that seek to promote tolerance for, and to provide a sense of place for, excluded communities. These are organizations that view the collection, conservation and interpretation of objects, as well as initiatives aimed at widening access, not as their aims but rather as the means by which wider social goals are attained. Here museums are driven by motivations based on social equality, democratization and empowerment.

It is easy to dismiss the social inclusion agenda as a passing whim, but the significance goes far beyond the confines of contemporary government policy. Its essence is rooted in equality. It is about museums going out beyond their traditional roles, seeking their rationale in something external to themselves. Many museums have been committed to creating a more equitable museum service for decades, aware that institutional change needs to happen to meet the needs of diverse communities.

As Mark O'Neill suggests, 'a socially inclusive art museum would … treat all visitors, existing and potential with equal respect, and providing access appropriate to their background, level of education, ability and life experience' (O'Neill 2002, p. 24). It is not something lacking in the visitor that has excluded them, but rather the inability of the museum to meet their needs.

When we consider the work of museums such as Cartwright Hall in Bradford, it is clear that, through collaborations, partnerships, thoughtful planning and careful programming, pathways have been created for those who traditionally might not have visited the gallery. What impact has this interactive experience had on the children involved?

We have some evidence from the national evaluation carried out by the Research Centre for Museums and Galleries for the Department for Education and Skills Museum and Gallery Education Programme Phase 1, where Cartwright Hall was one case study. The evaluation gives us some rich evidence of the impact. The children were motivated by their interaction with objects, and plastered the walls of their classroom with sketches, photographs, word banks, poems and thoughts. The experience gave them the inspiration to be creative. The teacher of one class from a school in an Education Action Zone said, 'the children were quite poor in literacy at the beginning of the year … they are slowly building up now … I can't believe how much they are using wonderful descriptions and vocabulary … the lamp [an artwork they studied] has really got their imagination.' Children developed skills in speaking and listening, observation and inquiry. They increased their knowledge and meaningful understanding. Access was promoted. 'Statemented children often have learning difficulties … one dyslexic boy working on the Anish Kapoor sculpture produced some really mature work – not something any of the other children did.' The process encouraged high standards and produced long-term value, and children continued to draw on the experience months later. It did much to increase their self-esteem, and self-confidence. Motivation, developing skills, increasing aspirations and giving greater access are all key to tackling the long-term impact of exclusion.

Education and outreach activities, together with access to information and decision-making, are the essential initial steps in unpicking the barriers – physical, intellectual, sensory, emotional, attitudinal, financial, cultural and technological. The removal of these barriers is complex, involving a holistic approach by the museum. Outreach work is just one of the components of a museum-wide approach, one of the many building blocks needed for diverse communities to begin to share in the cultural ownership of the rich and inspiring collections of museums and galleries. In the examples from Cartwright Hall we can see exactly how significant it is to create interactive experiences, to create a meaningful experience for children as the starting-point. The connections they need to hang their learning on to will stem from where they are now. So, for example, the Anish Kapoor sculpture *Turning the World Inside Out* was introduced to one school using the story *Alice through the Looking Glass*. The carefully planned and structured interactive education sessions are among the most powerful and effective ways of meeting the specific needs of non-traditional users, of creating pathways to inclusion.

Can we learn from this interaction? Are there ways in which galleries can be designed to re-create some of that interaction? How can the whole museum and gallery be developed with wider social goals that go beyond the notion of extending audiences?

As a museum educator I was a member of the project team that developed the decorative arts gallery 'Every Object Tells A Story' in 1998 at the Castle Museum, part of Nottingham City Museums. The gallery replaced decorative arts displayed on yards of fading hessian in a space that for many visitors was just a corridor to the café. The 'Every Object Tells A Story' gallery was conceived from a realization that the decorative art galleries it replaced worked well for one group of users: those who knew, understood and were enthusiastic about decorative arts. Not surprisingly, the galleries had been conceived with them in mind. The authorship of the gallery came from a single view, that of the curator, which perfectly complemented the interests of these specialist users. 'Every Object Tells A Story' started from a quite different premise. It was very much about creating a gallery that would connect, be relevant to, and engage diverse audiences. It not only aimed to be culturally inclusive but was also intended to show how museums and galleries could look at issues around racism and tolerance. It was informed by many years of outreach work with many excluded communities. This work showed that for people really to be included there needed to be tangible changes. The gallery concept and the detail brought together the curators' expertise of the collections with knowledge of audiences, and the input of people within the community too. These were not passive voices. However, as there was no desire to alienate an established and very loyal audience, a study gallery was developed alongside 'Every Object Tells A Story', where much more of the collection was available with much more in-depth documentation.

In creating a mainstream gallery we asked ourselves how we could create an environment that would create synaesthetic opportunities, so that the senses were working together, with the visual reinforcing the tactile, the physical reinforcing the intellectual. For most people who are not traditionally part of the decorative art community of practice, finding an initial connection with the collections was key, and essential to create pathways in. To achieve this interactivity was a critical element. No computer interactives were used, but rather very simple techniques: questions, drawers, feely boxes, comment cards and so on.

Experience and research told us that young children would dominate the length of time families spent in a gallery, so some of the displays were developed specifically to engage this group. Noah's Ark, a large, colourful, playful exhibit developed in collaboration with the local social services under-eights team, introduced decorative arts through collections of ceramic animals – the nineteenth-century monkey teapot, the cockerel, the ceramic pig – all experienced through peep-holes and feely boxes. Ironically, though the exhibit was designed and tested totally with children in mind, adults were regularly found crouching to see the animals too. A seventeenth-century bear jug was the focus for a story commissioned from the writer Michaela Morgan and illustrator Dee Shulman. Here children were taken on a journey that began at the museum entrance and travelled back in time. It enabled them to understand the context and background of the bear jug, by animating its history and its connections with Nottingham.

People's Choice (objects chosen by members of various communities) revealed very personal reasons for choice. For example, the Variety Club, a group of regular museum-users, all with mental health problems, chose from the decorative arts collection an unassuming cup and saucer, symbolic of a cup of tea! This was something that made them feel better, of huge significance when facing the debilitating impact of mental illness. The voices as well as the words of those who had chosen were important, and not only gave the public an insight into very different perspectives but also invited them to think what objects were special to them.

Both Noah's Ark and People's Choice focused on creating access. Other exhibits were designed to push the inclusion agenda further. The silver candlesticks once displayed as examples by an eighteenth-century silversmith and illustrating specific techniques, were interpreted by black video maker and performance poet, Dave 'Stick Man' Higgins. In the video Higgins talked about the candlesticks' links with the triangular slave trade, thus putting a powerful focus on the larger social context, which until then had not been mentioned in the objects' interpretation, and giving a voice to a hidden and painful history. This form of documentation illustrates how all our museum practices need to be informed if we are really to be inclusive; otherwise the language and values of earlier decades will still structure our thinking, with their lack of cultural context and their lack of understanding of the multi-dimensional value. Homosexual love is portrayed in the 'Lovers' Bowl' and is shown alongside heterosexual love in a display where people were invited to discover stories of love. Both the 'Lovers' Bowl' and the silver candlesticks challenged broader issues of tolerance, cultural diversity and sexuality.

Underpinning the whole development was a long-term, detailed consultation with the Drawbridge Disability Consultative Group, who not only gave practical advice on physical access issues but also promoted an ethos of empowering people with disabilities. Discussions moved from the choice of floor coverings to the detailed development of tactile interactives.

The evaluation of the gallery carried out by the Museums' Audience Advocate showed how important it is to meet basic needs before more subtle outcomes can become evident. Seating, effective lighting and general comfort were critical, as in Maslow's hierarchy of human needs.

Tracking particularly showed that 'dwell time' was much longer than for traditional displays. Interactives were key to giving visitors a way into looking and inquiring, without assumptions of previous knowledge. Conversations were stimulated around exhibits, and people unfamiliar with visiting found non-traditional displays a much easier way into the collections. They especially liked the interactive elements, which provided pathways to other interpretation, and often ended by reading lengthy labels, which were perceived as different to traditional labels because they were produced in encapsulated handling formats. A resource area gave access to more in-depth information. Validity was given to non-written sources, which were designed to the same standard. This ensured that different ways of learning were all accommodated. The gallery also acted as a mirror, where people could see themselves, making connections between their own lives and experiences.

For social inclusion work to be effective the museum needs to have as its starting-point a focus on the needs of those who are excluded. This means that the starting-point for gallery developments will be informed by how people interact and how they learn. If we take George Hein's constructivist model of learning, where learning is seen as the construction of meaning, then individuals construct meaning for themselves, based on their experience. The meaning we construct therefore depends on our past experiences. Learning is an active, social and contextual activity, and motivation is essential for learning. Underpinning all this are notions of social equality, democratization and empowerment. Interactivity has to be an essential and critical part of the process of creating inclusive museums. But to consider interactivity as a quick fix in creating an inclusive museum would be to underestimate the complexity of the inclusion agenda.

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Jocelyn is currently Research Manager at the Research Centre for Museums and Galleries in the Department of Museum Studies at the University of Leicester. She began her career teaching in secondary education, later doing Museum Studies at Leicester University. She worked at Stevenage Museum as Education Officer from 1985. In 1989 she joined he staff of Nottingham City Museums and Galleries where she extended her experience considerably holding several posts as Education Officer, Access Manager and Manager of the Museum Service. She worked to increase the capacity of the museum service to deliver hands on education sessions for formal education groups by developing a team of freelance museum educators. She was involved in early initiatives with none traditional audiences exploring the barriers to access that many people face, and developing strategies to overcome these. Developing programmes with some of the most excluded groups for example users of mental health services. Also actively involved in ensuring the needs of none traditional audiences were embedded into the whole museum organisation through initiatives like the Drawbridge Disability Consultative Group and the appointment of

an Audience Advocate. Her work with excluded groups actively informed the development of galleries like Every Object Tells a Story the redisplay of the decorative arts collection, rethinking how collections like 18thc silver candlesticks of Black slaves can be re interpreted in a post colonial context. Jocelyn is an advocate for the social relevance of museums, their role in challenging disadvantage, and the social responsibilities of Museums. She was part of the Department of Culture Media and Sports advisory group on developing a policy for social inclusion in museums and archives.

In 2000 she joined the Research Centre for Museums and Galleries established in 1999 in response to a growing need for research and evaluation within the sector, in particular around the relationship between museums, galleries and their audiences. She has been involved in several research projects around social inclusion and the social impact of museums and is currently involved in a major Resource initiative to measure the impact of learning in Museums, Libraries and Archives. She is co-author of several evaluation and research reports and of Building Bridges guidance on developing museum audiences (1998) and Including Museums perspectives on museums, galleries and social inclusion (2001). She has developed and delivered training on audience development and social inclusion and lectured widely nationally and internationally.