

Using Drama to Address Problems in Museum Education Facilitation

Problem 1: “Visitor Centered Experiences”

Museums are becoming increasingly aware that they need to celebrate the unique individuals who walk into their spaces (Simon, 2010). Historically, museums have been focused on displaying collections rather than engaging visitors. Museums need to provide engaging ways of interacting with collections beyond tiny text below an object. “When real people are integrated into museum experiences, [scientists, educators, artists, interpreters etc.] visitors can appreciate the scale of an object and its relationship to the world beyond the museum” (Falk, Dierking, Semmel, 2012, p. 288). Drama strategies bridge content and individuals and give visitors opportunities to share their own thoughts and experiences in a museum context: It Made Me Think, Words of Wisdom, Poster Dialogue, Vote From Your Seat, The Truth About Me, Story of My Name, Artifacts, Frozen Picture, Statues, This Setting Needs, Soundscapes. These strategies place the viewer in active dialogue with the exhibit and the people around them (Hubard, 2006; Simon, 2010). That dialogue can deepen meaning-making for the visitor and help relate the content in the museum to the visitor’s world outside the museum (see problem 3). Finally, embodied interaction with exhibit content can counteract western ways of learning (Taylor, 24).

Problem 2: Practical Constraints of Museum Facilitation

Facilitators teach in galleries where other visitors may be present, they have little time and must focus on only parts of the museum’s collection, and they don’t have the opportunity to build community in the same way a classroom teacher can. Facilitators must carefully choose from a large toolkit of strategies and adjust based on practical constraints. Rather than focusing on content, facilitators should focus on “museum literacy” or how to “do” a museum (Falk, Dierking, Semmel, 2012). The following strategies can be adapted to teach museum literacy: Artifacts, Statues, This Settings Needs, Guided Imagery. You can also have students create their own “viewfinder” by shaping their hands into an “O” and looking through various objects focusing on color, texture, shape, or other factors to teach aesthetic vocabulary. The facilitator can then use “D.A.R” to collect visitor responses and begin a dialogue about the exhibit content (Dawson and Lee, 2018). Teaching museum literacy over content allows more room for individual interpretation of objects (see problem 1) and gives the visitors tools to use at future cultural institutions (see problem 3). The advantage of using drama to teach museum literacy is that “...sensory, rather than cognitive, experiencing of museums, particularly for first-time visitors,” is more effective at cementing learning that can be applied beyond the museum walls (Falk, Dierking, Semmel, 2012, p. 266). (see problem 3). In one study, students who experienced drama or theatre during their visit retained more content, demonstrated empathetic responses to content, and were able to construct a historical narrative two months after their visit (Jackson and Rees Leahy, 2006).

Using Drama to Address Problems in Museum Education Facilitation

Problem 3: Beyond the Museum

While visitors often reflect positively on museum visits, “relatively few visitors actually associate key changes in their thinking or actions directly related to museum experiences.” (Falk, Dierking, Semmel, 2012, p. 249). Interaction with a museum facilitator and engaging in a performance related with museum content have the most long-lasting effects on visitor engagement and critical thinking about content after the visit. (Simon, 2010). Several drama strategies relate museum content to a visitor’s world beyond the museum: It Made me Think, Poster Dialogue, This Setting Needs, Soundscapes, Paired/Group Improvisation. Additionally, museums can offer lessons to teachers for pre and post museum visits. Great strategies to share with teachers are: Alphabet Relay, Visual Mapping, Exploding Atom, Mapping Geographies of Home, Guided Imagery, Roll on the Wall, Paired/Group Improvisation, Writing in Role, Exploration/Adventure. Finally, museums can better prepare school-group visitors for an experience by considering Universal Basic Design. Some museums offer previews for students with special needs, but all students can benefit from preparing for the sights, sounds, smells, and expectations of the museum. If visitors don’t continue their learning beyond the museum walls, the trip is wasted. A visit should enhance classroom learning and provide a new way to view objects in our world. Or, as one child said in a British study, “Museums can tell you more than teachers can and, were it not for coming to the museum, . . . you wouldn’t know if it’s true.” (Jackson and Rees Leahy, 2006, p. 319)

Other ways drama can appear in cultural institutions:

1. Historic Interpretation – museum lingo for “Teacher in Role” (Roth, 1998)
2. Character scripts to establish context, ex: The Holocaust Memorial Museum (Bennett, 2013, pp. 50-60)
3. Interpretive performances in exhibits that combine scripted performance with audience feedback (Bridal, 2004; Hughes, 1998)
4. Role play in Children’s Museums (LaVilla-Havelin, 1990)
5. An “architectural script”- designing the flow of an exhibit or institution to tell a specific narrative as visitors move through (Casey, 2005)

While not specifically called “drama,” much of museum education studies calls for facilitators to use embodied and dialogic ways of meaning-making with students and objects in a collection. These requests are either posed as a challenge without concrete strategies attached or suggest using drama strategies but calling them by other names and without discussion of the pedagogical reasons the strategies work (Hubard, 2006). During my research, I found plenty of information about theatre and performance in museums and suggestions to make museum education more interactive. Therefore, this gap in the research calls for deeper study of the use of drama specific strategies in museum contexts.

Using Drama to Address Problems in Museum Education Facilitation

Bibliography

Bennett, Susan. *Theatre & Museums*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

Bridal, Tessa. *Exploring Museum Theatre*. Altamira Press, 2004.

Casey, Valerie. "Staging Meaning: Performance in the Modern Museum." *TDR/The Drama Review*, vol. 49, no. 3, Sept. 2005, pp. 78–95. DOI.org (Crossref), <https://doi.org/10.1162/1054204054742507>.

Dawson, Kathryn, and Bridget Kiger Lee. *Drama-Based Pedagogy: Activating Learning across the Curriculum*. Intellect, 2018.

Falk, John H., and Lynn D. Dierking. *The Museum Experience Revisited*. Left Coast Press, Inc, 2013.

Hubard, Olga M. *Activities in the Art Museum*. National Art Education Association, 2006, https://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/learn/courses/Hubard_Activities_in_the_Art_Museum.pdf.

Hughes, Catherine. *Museum Theatre: Communicating with Visitors through Drama*. Heinemann, 1998.

Jackson, Anthony, and Helen Rees Leahy. "'Seeing It for Real ...?'—Authenticity, Theatre and Learning in Museums This Article Draws on the Combined Efforts of the Research Team: Anthony Jackson, Helen Rees Leahy, Paul Johnson (Research Assistant, Centre for Applied Theatre Research, Manchester University) and Verity Walker (Museum Consultant and Director of 'Interpret-Action')." *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, vol. 10, no. 3, Nov. 2005, pp. 303–25. DOI.org (Crossref), <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569780500275956>.

LaVilla-Havelin, Jim. "Role Playing in Children's Museums." *The Journal of Museum Education*, vol. 15, no. 2, Taylor & Francis, Ltd., 1990, pp. 12–14.

Roth, Stacy Flora. *Past into Present: Effective Techniques for First-Person Historical Interpretation*. University of North Carolina Press, 1998.

Simon, Nina. *The Participatory Museum*. Museum 2.0, 2010.

Taylor, Diana. *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*. Duke University Press, 2003.