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Co-creating, co-producing and connecting

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Abstract

We argue in this paper that museums have become hybrid spaces, where consumers look and challenge what they see; they form part of what they see; with some aspects of exhibitions now co-created and co-produced by the consumer (Kershaw et al. 2018a,b; Solis 2012). This paper draws on an example from a group that we worked with using performance as a tool to engage a ‘hard to reach’ or ‘socially excluded’ groups. We conclude that by allowing audiences to co-create and co-produce exhibitions and performance; this can turn the museum rhetoric of community engagement into practice and create a space that is truly inclusive for the communities it serves. We demonstrate how the possibility of seeing museums as hybrid spaces, which can adapt, can be used for education and entertainment, and how that has in turn led to the transformation of people's lives in a previously socially excluded community.

Introduction

Museums of the twenty-first century no longer rely on an taxonomic array of artefacts in glass cases for comparative learning. Contemporary museological practice tends toward spaces where “audiences encounter and engage with [...] objects [...] sounds, moving images, multimedia installations, performers, and so on” (Allain and Harvie, 2006, 175). The complexity of these spaces is attributed with attracting new audiences by offering a variety of ways of engaging with museum content. Changing the “taste” of a culture by upending social positioning (Bourdieu 1996; Daenekindt and Roose 2017). This new musology creates learning visits that are focused on

visitor experience than the object on display (Solis, 2012): an encounter with a past that is 'brought to life' through 'events,' advertising and performance, simultaneously eliciting criticisms that museums suffer from 'Disneyfication' or are reduced to 'edutainment' an epithet suggesting that loss of deeper learning potential inherent in more traditional tactics (McPherson, 2006; Jackson and Kidd, 2011; Komarac et al 2017; Balanzategui et al 2018; Dewhurst, 2018).

Museums are a "focal point for communities" and "inclusive spaces where people from different backgrounds can come together" (The National Strategy for Scotland's Museums, Galleries and Heritage Sites, 2012, 22). Factually, these museums are still businesses, whether public cultural institution, non-profit endeavour or part of the commercial sector. Few museums would survive, however, if not subsidized based on an expectation that they will use these funds to provide welfarist benefits through an expanded visitor base and evidence of service to the broad general public. In providing these services, their exhibitions allow people to explore identity and an increased understanding of heritage. One can interpret this educational remit as service to a neo-liberal agenda of performance and performativity within a commercial market for leisure activity choices.

Policy makers are caught between broad educational remits and the marketplace. Cultural policy in the UK is squarely based in a neo-liberal plural approach to engagement. Firmly tied to the Treasury Green Book agenda, the policy recognises that government funding is not the only source of support, now considers the entertainment world as a useful model for delivery beyond the aging middle class consumer.

The Museums Association (MA) and The International Council of Museums (ICOM) are aware that the twenty-first century museum is required to be more than a

collection to be viewed and contemplated. In the past, museum policy advocates like MA and ICOM prompted museums to step up their focus on audience engagement. In the UK, through the implementation of The National Strategy for Scotland's Museums and Galleries and the Code of Ethics for Museums, UK policy leaders created a shared framework under which museums and galleries would have "the opportunity to revisit, rethink and refresh the museum offer within the wider landscape of social and cultural capital" (The national strategy for Scotland's Museums, Galleries and Heritage Sites, 2012, 10). We have entered an age where digital technology has changed the rules of engagement. Consumers no-longer visit museums as passive spectators but look to engage with collections directly through their portable devices; the experience is digital, participatory and informed (Gillispie, 2010; van Dijck, 2013; Sanz, 2017). Visitors have discovered a different cultural capital from traditional museum offerings and inclusion is being thought of in different terms (Sanz, 2017). Increasingly, museums are also offering virtual experiences of the museums and the collections. We argue that museums have become hybrid spaces, where consumers look and challenge what they see; form part of what they see; or participate as co-creators formulating an idea or co-producing an exhibition or performance with the museum staff (Solis, 2012). We define the idea of the hybrid museum as an organisation consisting of both a physical and online space where discipline and medium boundaries are entwined, creating a multidisciplinary space engaging to visitors of all forms (Chung, 2003; Dewdney et al, 2013)

Co-creation in the museum setting can be defined as the active institutional commitment and engagement with visitors in an "ongoing, give-and-take process of participatory conversation, dialogue, and idea sharing" (Moyer 2007; Simon 2010). Co-production, on the other hand, is defined by Brandsen & Honingh (2016) as

“services [that] are not only delivered by professional and managerial staff in public agencies but also co-produced by citizens and communities” (p.427). Kershaw and colleagues (2017) suggest that the application of co-production to the museum sector will strengthen user outcomes and increase connections to their surrounding communities. Co-production should also “improve the outcome of consumption to create value for both suppliers and for consumers” (Thyne and Hede, 2016).

To examine these questions, we draw on results of our year-long research using performance as the tool to engage groups categorized as ‘hard to reach’ or ‘socially excluded.’

Museum Performance and Performativity

“Museums are becoming dynamic environments in the service of the society aiming at reconnecting with the public and demonstrating their value and relevance in contemporary life” (Tsiropoulou et al, 2017). In the UK where our study was conducted, there is a move towards engaging a more multicultural audience (Black, 2005, 2). To meet this objective, many museums have focused on building collections and exhibition programs that are more representative of the people in their surrounding communities not just the “tourists, middle class and highly educated” (Booth et al, 2017; Falk and Dierking, 2018). A contemporary museum visitor expects a museum to perform the role of a complete leisure experience (Germak and Khan, 2017).

The only way for museums and galleries to continue to attract a visitor base and expand on that base is to provide a leisure experience that has an all round twenty-first century interactive experience and sometimes that leaves museums and the entertainment industry uneasy. Experimenting with this multi-dimensional remit has led some museums to question what they are, and what their role in society is, or a

challenge of trying to satisfy too many competing goals that is affecting their relationship visitors (Black, 2005, 4). To quote Black (2005, 267), the “change or die” phenomenon sets educational goals in seeming conflict with leisure pursuits and being a venue where ideas and cultures collide to produce positive cultural discourse (Germak and Khan, 2017; Lavanga, 2006). Diversifying service, is not meant as an abandonment of prior practices, but rather, a ‘business like’ expansion of service.

Digital Age

Museums irrespective of subject and focus, tend to provide a learning experience that emerges from the dialogue between visitor and site (Falco and Vassos, 2017). Jaén and colleagues (2005) suggest that creating social interaction among museum visitors is effortful to create dynamic customizable visits and simple mechanisms to explore large collections. For more than a decade, museums have explored this tension through production of hybrid conditions, augmenting museum collections with digital media that encourages active inquiry (Koleva, 2009). Koleva notes that “the technical expertise required by programming-based approaches means that the vast majority of domain professionals [do not have the training and therefore] are not able to directly experiment with the affordances of digital media without the aid of computer programmers (Koleva, 2009).

Although it is recognized that some museums require specialist expertise to develop digital enhancement, those with the expertise are showing vast development of their visitor experience. For example, Jaén (2005) reports that the MoMo project created a Social Interaction subsystem that allowed visitors to message other visitors, create affinity groups, or see those who saw an artwork before them. While capacity varies across the field, the political push toward these hybrid experiences is changing how museums look to engage with their visitor base.

Negotiating Space: the challenge of cultural barriers

Museums and galleries are looking to raise awareness of their existence to those who would not normally visit their establishments and seek to develop new partnership approaches to delivering the service (Simon, 2010). Deconstructing and understanding the barriers that create the gap, is the key to developing an audience base (Black, 2005, 61). Soon after it was published, Bourdieu's (1996) theory of cultural taste afforded an important lens for examining the choice to spend time at cultural sites (Bennett, 2005), Boyne (2002) and Prior (2005) both suggested that his theories are outdated and unable to keep up with the continuous tangibility of society in the modern world. DiMaggio and Mukhtar (2004) further highlight that the evolution of popular culture led universities and "non-profit cultural institutions" to more populist arts and media forms (171) that quickly supplanted Bourdieu's work. Despite the criticism, Bourdieu's theories continue to provide insight into the museum culture, the visitors they attracted in the past, why they may be in crisis with the type of visitors they attract today and the continued lack of full representation of from their surrounding communities.

Bourdieu (1996) discussed the nature of social and cultural capital and the impact of social class on the diversity of visitors to museums and galleries. He theorized that only members of a higher socio-economic status held the social and cultural capital to engage with the higher arts such as museums, galleries and theatre. The push towards museums engaging with members of the lower socio-economic classes have driven cultural institution policy makers to focus on new services to classes of people traditionally not present in the visitor base. While seemingly

paternalistic, the data we present in this study suggests that a two way process creates enriched cultural capital.

Consumption/Production

Changing how a museum interacts with its visitors both inside and outside the museum can affect its popularity. Kelly (2011) states that museum success is dependent on three intersecting activity domains, the physical, online, and mobile. The exhibitions, the staff, what facilities it has, the external benefits to its surrounding communities and visitors it wishes to inspire (Watson, 2007; Weil, 2003).

With emerging new media being so accessible to a large majority of the population, it is no surprise that museums are trying to catch up with these tools as a means of engagement and social inclusion. Although there is a growing trend in museums to provide entertainment as part of exhibitions, these changes are also subject to criticism as these new tools reshape museum identity, and role in a commercial world (Black 2005; 2012; Gray, 2016; Kershaw et al, 2018).

The attitude that visitors have towards museums are different from even a decade ago; visitors demand more from museum sites including access to the collection through technological devices (Ambrose and Paine, 2018, 18). Events such as community engagement projects, workshops, activities, lectures, talks, tours and performances are all different types of interactive engagement activities that are employed to attempt to attract a diverse audience to the site. These events offer visitors an opportunity to experience not only the performativity of the exhibit but also the performativity of the site. Providing this range of activities and services in turn heightens the visitor's expectations for museums. Although the benefit of an events program is acknowledged, some staff describe this work negatively or time consuming (Ambrose

and Paine, 2006, 62). Despite this resistance, the museums, galleries and heritage sites that commit the resources to creating larger scale engagement programs report that the effort does attract a wider and more diverse audience base.

Users Co-creating the Experience.

Interactive modes of delivery have created a new form of attraction and interest in these sites generating a wide range of visitors from young children to the elderly of all classes. To sustain engagement by audiences traditionally missing at the museum Loureiro and colleagues (2017) suggest that engagement should be conceived as an opportunity to “embrace a proactive visitor relationship” (826). Obviously, this pedagogical change has led to some displacement as resources are directed toward the social role of co-creating mutually beneficial exhibition content or programmes with local communities towards a shared goal (Davis, 2007; Simon 2010; Thyne and Hede 2016). Allowing participants to be equal creators of the final product empowers both the co-creators and other visitors, fostering a sense of belonging to the site and the exhibit. (Black 2005; Knudsen 2016). These results are well documented in the evaluation of *Duet for Four Chambers* developed by University of Manchester students. Co-creation of the performance encouraged participants and visitors to become an “active agent” throughout the whole engagement process and to take away “their own emotional, physiological or conceptual response to the encounter” (Niblett and Allison, 2016). Project *RETHNK* at the National Maritime Museum demonstrated that developing co-produced projects requires trust from both sides of the relationship, engaged listening and participatory activities that are meaningful to the surrounding community to create a cultural change in the institution and is attributed with increased democratisation of the museums content and programming (Salter, 2018).

The Present Study

Based on the emerging research on socially engaged museum experiences, our museum team undertook a collaborative research project with a ‘socially excluded’ or ‘hard to reach’ community group in South Ayrshire to investigate how performance can assist a local authority museum to develop a relationship with its surrounding community and widen its visitor group. The investigation used a practice-as-research methodology (Freeman, 2010; Kershaw and Nicholson, 2011) applying artistic and creative strategies of performance, for our work with our community representatives. The project developed four different creative and performance outputs over the course of one year.

The Creative Practice

The performance projects were all developed from communal themes but they could also either enhance the site’s community engagement and/or enhance exhibitions (Prendergast and Saxton, 2009). They were created with a co-creation style of working (Simon, 2010) which provided the opportunity for the participants to work together with the museum to develop each project.

Although each project had a performative element, they were all different media, which were attractive to participants for a range of reasons. Some preferred to work on the film because they wanted to be creative but not the focus of the performance and others preferred to focus on the storytelling, which was the backbone to each project (Simon, 2010), who put forward that working with different media allows the participants to feel confident about their ideas and take leadership with a medium that they felt comfortable with. In turn, they felt empowered by this opportunity to have their voices heard.

Developing a Relationship

To enable continuous engagement with groups, a relationship needs to be built and then maintained. The confidence of the individuals who participated in numerous projects seemed to make it easier and possibly a more comfortable atmosphere for those who were new to participating. This falls in line with what Bourdieu (2010) discusses in reference to social capital being gained by individuals through networks (p. 27). It seemed that one of their peers having confidence in the project and my providing comfort as a facilitator to new participants meant that they developed confidence at a faster pace than those who participated in the very first project. Once a relationship is formed with a group, focus can be moved to developing more relationships with other groups and so the community engagement for the site is in turn developed. This practice methodology brought attention to the effect of the participants' process and place-based experiences, which in turn could be linked to the outcomes that flowed from the final performance.

Most notably, participants reported that the interactive co-creation process developed a sense of trust between the "hard to reach" group and the museum staff. Thyne and Hede (2016) attribute the effectiveness of this type of work to the focus on efforts to explore symbolic (social, confidence skills) and productive (creative, technical skills) efforts in the creation process. Furthermore, flexibility in the creation allowed all participants on their own terms. Results were also compared with historical data on how the museum presented work, its management, the research has explored and developed new and exciting ways of engaging with visitors. The research has also demonstrated that this type of program development helped sustain relationships with the surrounding community over a longer period. The research provided insight from the community group participants and the local authority staff,

including management and policymakers over the year long period. These data offered a new understanding of how all participants perceived the spaces prior to creating the performance projects and monitored the changes that were achieved.

The research was based on concepts of cultural engagement Bourdieu's theories to analyse the museum and to develop knowledge about the site and its relationship with the surrounding community. The work of other theorists such as Putnam (2001) and Coleman (1988); who were heavily influenced by Bourdieu, was also used to look at the concepts of social and cultural capital and how these concepts worked in connection with the barriers that may stop visitors from engaging with the site. We used the notion of Putman's (2001) bonding capital (making connections with the social group) and bridging capital (building bridges across the social group to the museum). Putman suggested that the bonding capital would help the group 'get by' but that bridging capital was crucial to 'getting ahead'. Added to this Solis' (2012) work on Generation C, the connected consumer was used to examine how young people today are connected digitally 24/7; the digital disruption or revolution that we are witnessing, is hitting producers and services head on and how the bridging capital could help the other way. In other words, the development of social capital was a two way process; the museum staff could learn from the group as well as the group learn to participate and consume the museum. The reality is that not only do you need the cultural capital to participate in a museum experience; you need the digital capital to consume the experience and tell everyone about it simultaneously. The worrying trend here, was that not only were museums at risk of not keeping up with engagement strategies through digital inclusion, but consumers were in danger of being excluded further, through the digital divide, of not understanding or being able to afford the technology.

A framework was created from the findings which can be applied in other museum establishments to build on community engagement and to create original practice-based performances; as a form of bridging capital that brings in community groups and can slowly introduce them to the museum using performance, exhibition and then digital tools and help those in positions of power in the museum to understand how to engage with different user groups and that it's not 'one size fits all'. As part of this process, the community group participants were brought into the site to enable them to engage with the buildings and surrounding grounds from the beginning of the research to build their confidence in being there and engaging with the staff, other visitors and the exhibitions. As Black (2009) states "Co-creative projects progress very similarly to collaborative projects, but they confer more power to participants" (264). Each project was developed through a series of workshops where the participants were encouraged to develop a creative product that would be exhibited within the museum.

There were many issues that have been highlighted throughout the research at the museum and the findings highlight that the operational aspects of the museum are at odds with local authorities policies. There are many aspects of the museum that worked well on a daily basis but other areas that require attention. If the museum wishes to expand their visitor base from their regular visitors, they need to develop their community engagement to be more inclusive and with that means the opening of resources for community use and participation; rather than the 'do not touch' approach that was applied in this particular museum.

Even though they have numerous, changing exhibitions, they still seem to attract the same visitor base. They recognised this and the need to develop better digital marketing and advertising to inform their surrounding community of their

exhibitions and programme of events and to develop exhibitions that are more inclusive, in coordination with schools and young people through a medium that they are used to, within the local community. Development of activities, tours, talks, performances, etc., in line with the “Curriculum for Excellence” and in conjunction with their surrounding community, they may find that they attract a more diverse visitor base. Taking exhibitions or using performance out in the community to give community groups, schools and individuals, who do not visit the site, a taste of what they would encounter if they did visit would assist in breaking down barriers the bridging capital that Putman and others refer.

The research highlighted that the use of performance workshops and practices enhanced the participants’ confidence and that social-economy skills were developed within the group, which were an unintended but very positive result. This transformation of power therefore led to significant engagement with participants, which in turn then developed changes within their lives, e.g. one was accepted to study fine art, one went to college, another built bridges with their family and others volunteered locally. Having the freedom to co-create all of the projects was key to making the group feel that they were part of the site and the development of each project, which in turn made them feel more comfortable and accepted in the site and made them proud of their final projects. The development of such social economy skills was not an objective of the research project, but an unplanned benefit to those people involved in the project and a benefit that has longer term, wider social health benefits for the community and their families.

The performance projects also developed a new visitor base from the participants and their families and friends who came to see the completed projects; therefore, a new and more diverse visitor base was generated. The research has

informed us that if people are made aware of the exhibitions and activities that are going on within the site, even through word of mouth, they will come if they feel that it will be of interest to them. But, more than that, involve them in the process and you develop symbolic (social, confidence, trust skills) as well as production skills (creative, artistic skills). The museum also needs to embrace developing their use of multimedia both within their exhibitions to enhance their visitor experience, to develop interactive learning through different media both on and off the site, through different digital media such as social media to assist in the engagement with Generation C and help them connect to site's exhibitions and programme of events.

The research found that individuals who had not previously engaged with the site can come to feel part of its social community when there are opportunities for them to engage on different participatory levels. Therefore, the development and continuity of the community engagement of the site will without a doubt attract a continuous, diverse audience base.

Recommendations

Community engagement should be part of the planning for all events and exhibitions at Local Authority cultural sites and should be just as important as the development of the exhibitions themselves. Allowing different members of the community to engage with the development of the museum and gallery planning will allow the site to move away from visitors to museums and galleries being represented by a small section of the community who are often older and wealthier and who hold higher formal education levels. It can be argued that this creates a barrier keeping those who are not represented from engaging with the museum. It can also be argued that this site appeared to only have relationships with schools, groups and its surrounding community from one side of the surrounding area, reinforcing the

stereotypes about those attending the museum and failing to satisfy the social-inclusion agenda of Council policy.

Local Authority sites needs to generate direct participation with communities and groups to build on its engagement, develop the interactive activities that complement its exhibitions and focus on better advertising to inform the surrounding community of its exhibitions and activities. This will develop relationships with community groups, which are important especially when working with groups who do not generally engage with the site.

Relationships are key to engagement. Developing relationships with schools and groups will allow the gallery to engage with different community groups, and will provide them with an opportunity to meet groups and develop a relationship with them. In turn, this will provide opportunity for communication and consultation on what future exhibitions and activities they should seek to develop. By building these relationships, the site and staff will have the ability to further develop their exhibition programme with and around the interests of the surrounding community.

Furthermore, this will allow the site to develop an exhibition calendar that can involve and be open to workshops, group activities and many more aspects of engagement that can be linked into the site and its exhibitions.

The implementation of media and interactive means into the site would make the site exhibitions more accessible to a larger majority of the surrounding community. Therefore, further implementation of multimedia and performance within the site is advisable although this must be planned in conjunction with the planning of the exhibition, to ensure that there is a high level of expectation about all aspects of the exhibition/event and activities. This would also assist in sending out the message

that museums and galleries are no longer elitist and that they belong to the community and should be enjoyed by all.

Without the continued development of community engagement, Local Authority cultural sites are in danger of remaining unknown, unvisited and underused by its surrounding community. The site is rich with history and has a lot to give back to its community and would be a great asset and enjoyed by many if community engagement was a priority. This research has provided insight and knowledge into the development of co-created community-performance projects, in the hope that Local Authorities may learn from the findings to further develop community engagement in their cultural heritage sites.

Conclusion

The hybrid museum offers the possibility to attract new audiences by assessing the performance and performativity of the site and looking at both the business and the educational targets. By drawing on Bourdieu's theories of social and cultural capital, as a lens with which to look at the changes, over time, we can witness the changes through the development of museums as object focussed to that, that has led them as modern day entertainment and education spaces that are socially inclusive. It can be seen that museums have learned from other, popular culture and leading leisure establishments to break down preconceived barriers. Through the use of workshops with non-users, museums can broaden their visitor experience. This can be done through assessment of visitor consumption and development of exhibitions that are made accessible to all, with different levels of social capital through the use of modern digital methods; connecting with young people in forms that they understand and feel comfortable. Through the analysis of both visitors and exhibitions, performance through for example, interactive exhibitions, film or plays

etc can assist in being a helpful tool to bridge the gap in both visitor numbers and in skills of both the museum staff and the visitor to further develop the impact of the museum. The cultural divide will only serve to get wider; if we do not embrace other participatory techniques as a way of connecting, co-creating and co-producing museums. The young people are there, we just need the museums to catch up and learn from each other that the bridging capital that Bourdieu and Putman refer to, is a two-way process and can help the transform both the experience and learning of the visitor and the museum educator.

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