

What are the benefits and drawbacks of providing gallery space for interactive and educational displays? How would you ensure, if you were the curator, that the collection was well represented in the interactives?

In order to answer the above question, firstly we have to define the importance of education and interactives within a museum environment and then we can describe the benefits and drawbacks of implementing such initiatives. We will also be assessing the position of the curator and how they can use the collection appropriately in order to gain the best effect from interactives without having a detrimental effect.

In an undated article on the Campaign for Learning in Museums & Galleries website, Mark Taylor (Director of the Museums Association) said, "...one of the main functions of a museum gallery, perhaps the main function, is learning." Although traditionally the *raison d'être* of a museum is collecting, it is as a learning tool that the collection is primarily brought to the consideration of the public. This implies that museums have to seriously consider providing educational facilities, regardless of cost, effort and the effect on the collection. Luckily, there is help at hand as there are currently financial incentives and government aid to enable museums to realise the educational potential of their collections.

Interactives can be used by museums to enable the visitor to experience the collection in a more 'hands-on' way. Types of interactive can include touchscreens providing information, video films, audio clips, reconstructions, using the object itself (e.g. trying on a centurion's helmet and shield), fact finding trails, quizzes, video conferencing and many more. There are many ways to use interactives within a collection - the only limit is the imagination (and budget) of the curator. With the advent of new technology interactives can provide more accessible and innovative displays. This leads to the first drawback.

Apart from being expensive (a recurring theme to any improvement for the museum) technology used in displays has to be carefully planned to enable it to stay interesting and useful for a number of years as technology can become dated very quickly. Having outdated equipment can detract from the quality of the display as the more technologically knowledgeable visitors may become too concerned with the equipment and not the content.

The quantity of the interactives within a museum need to be balanced carefully - too few and the collection may be uninteresting to many visitors, too many and the visitor may become preoccupied with the interactives and ignore the collection. This can be a problem in many museums that overuse interactives. For example, a visitor to Wandsworth Museum is confronted with interactive after interactive - ranging from using a replica flint to cut leather, viewing themselves in a mirror dressed as a king, turning a wheel to see the difference in speed between carts on road and carts on rails or turning a millstone to demonstrate milling procedures. Even visitors of an allegedly mature age and intellectual capability rush around the museum playing with the interactives and bypassing the objects on display.

Well thought out and put together interactives can complement the objects in the collection and give the visitor a context in which the object can be placed. To take a previous example, a replica centurion's uniform can show the visitor the way the item was made, its materials, how heavy it is and they can imagine what the centurion would have felt like having to wear the uniform on long marches.

Interactives also have to be created carefully for a variety of visitors ensuring that they do not alienate a particular visitor group. It would be useful to examine the museum visitor demographics to establish the largest type of visitor group. With this information the curator can determine the most appropriate level to position the interactive. If the display is too basic the more mature visitors may feel patronised and not revisit, too high and a majority of school groups may not be interested.

There is also the question of space. Museums often have a lack of room to display and store their existing collection. Interactives can take over space that may be in demand for important artefacts. Education can often demand a separate room for school visits. A curator has to weigh up the options very carefully and decide whether the collection is enhanced enough to sacrifice the display space.

Education in museums also has to be planned very carefully. Museum Education officers (if the museum is lucky enough to have a dedicated member of staff) have to work very closely with teachers to ensure the provided facilities and beneficial and important to the pupils area of study. Custom building projects for certain themes and subject areas can enable the objects to realise their full potential.

Education as a concept is very important to museums as it opens up the collection to a whole new audience and maybe to a new interpretation. But it can have its drawbacks. A major problem again is cost. Concentrating on education throughout the museum requires the employment and continual training of an education officer to liaise with schools and colleges to ensure their needs are met and that the projects don't become stale, dated or overused and that they keep up with the changing demands of the National Curriculum. Also, concentrating on objects that only relate to the National Curriculum can lead to the rest of the collection being neglected, much of which may have its own interesting and relevant histories that could provide a basis for learning.

It is important to consider the varying audiences and different types of learners that can visit a museum. Curators have to take in to consideration the different levels of requirements that come from the many groups of learners and not just those of school ages. There is also the factor of Key Stages within the National Curriculum. It is important to consider what schools are going to visit the museum and what particular age group the visitors will be. Museums should be a font of knowledge, not just a collection of pretty things to look at.

Another benefit of using museums as an education tool is that it can cover other subjects other than history - art, literature, literacy, numeracy, social studies, science and information and communication technologies (ICT) can be learnt within a museum environment. Objects can inspire creative writing, drawing and painting,

open up questions about the use of the object the time period and the type of people using the object. This interest can develop into classroom-based projects that use ICT for example developing websites, using webcams, creating videoboard. It is often possible that the product of the project can be incorporated into the displays and marketing of the museum itself. The museum also lends itself to a constructive learning environment. Pupils who are disaffected with the traditional classroom set up with its strict processes can find the museum environment stimulating and liberating and have been known to discover skills and interests they didn't know they had.

Incorporating education and interactives, as they often work hand in hand, is a difficult path for a curator to take. There are many factors that have to be taken into account, a number of which have already been discussed. Apart from the cost, which is always the overriding factors, there is also the question of staffing, training, market positioning, themes and subjects.

It is clear from the above and from the wealth of information and advice that is available from the government that education is a necessity in museums and galleries. The balance between the importance of the collection and importance of educational facilities has to be carefully managed. For the curator, this has to involve a lot of preparation including meeting with teachers, education advisors and possibly pupils to agree on what is needed at every level. This needs to be discussed with the welfare of the collection at the forefront because the importance of the collection is twofold – as the reason for the museums existence and as a learning tool.

Using this information the curator can decide whether the National Curriculum is the place to start, whether all Key Stages are to be covered or whether one level is suitable and how a selected artefact can be used as an educational object.

Interactives have to represent the collection effectively. Does the curator only use the 'fun' objects or does he have a responsibility to make the historically interesting artefacts more enjoyable and attractive to the public. It is also important to ensure that the interactives are in keeping with the museum style and complement the collection. In a smaller museum a number of different display styles can make the collection seem disjointed and even chaotic.

If I were a museum curator the following factors, which I believe are the most important, would need to be addressed before I began implementing interactives within the museum.

The objects in the collection would need to be assessed individually and as a whole to ensure a balance of representation through the chronological and thematic sections.

The demographics of the visitors would have to be considered to ensure the interactives appealed to the widest audience possible, maybe in addition to polling the visitors to see what they would like to see.

The cost of the implementation needs to be calculated to ensure that the whole budget is not spent creating and maintaining interactives and that the conservation and management of the collection is not left wanting.

In summary, implementing any kind of tailored display that does not take the collection as the priority needs to be carefully and cautiously planned to ensure that the collection remains the most important factor within the museum.

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Sources

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