Chapter 3

A Museum Educator’s Guide to Implementing a Digital Pedagogy Using Connectivism: Making the Case with iPads to Enhance K–12 Student Learning in Art Museum Education

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ABSTRACT

Using international case studies from art museums, this chapter examines how museum educators are integrating iPads in their programming to offer interactive learning opportunities for K–12 audiences. It argues for the importance of a digital pedagogy in museum education as well as the adoption of a new learning theory for the digital age, within a museum educator’s pedagogy. The chapter demonstrates how Siemens’ and Downes’ theory of connectivism can be applied to analyse and develop strategies that enable museum educators to embed the iPad in museum learning and support the development of General Capability and Visual Art specific skills. The strategies and challenges associated with implementing iPad technology in museum education are discussed within the context of the motivations and trends for digital education pedagogy, the shifting role of art museum education, and the role of the museum educator in the digital age. Findings demonstrate the applicability of connectivism in museum education and recommendations for museum educators to integrate iPads in their pedagogy.

INTRODUCTION

Museums are institutions for the general public; its core function is to collect, preserve and present information and knowledge to appreciate and learn from. Conventionally, learning in museums focus on knowledge transfer. However, in an attempt to create a more meaningful role in contemporary society, museums are opening their collections to a diverse audience with the aim of promoting
both scholarship and education through visitor-orientated experiences that are participatory, interactive and democratic. In an endeavour to move away from its traditional focus on objects and collections, modern-day museums are becoming active learning centres where people, especially school children from K-12, can discover new knowledge about the world and challenge themselves (Falk & Dierkling, 2000). One key way in which museums demonstrate focus on its patrons is by promoting interactivity; this has become one of the most important design tools in a museums’ exhibition design, education and public programming, particularly when it comes to attracting visitors and encouraging repeat visitation (Liu, 2013). According to Meecham & Stylianou (2012) interactivity is an approach that favours the subject who interprets the information provided, placing emphasis on a multiplicity of perspectives and diversity. Interaction design commonly makes use of technology with the view that museum visits, for the most part, are social experiences – it aims to shift perceptions of the museum away from the contemplative approach towards an object.

Interaction in the museum context has transformed immeasurably in response to the entertainment and media industries adopting interactive features (Liu, 2013), increasing competition in the leisure and entertainment industries and the proliferation of, and access to new technologies. Indeed, research suggests that its popularity among museum audiences might be due to technology’s attractive character and its potential to sustain attention (Screven, 1990; Evans & Sterry, 1999). Such trends have signaled the need for museum staff to deliver “content-driven, informative, educational and entertaining experiences” (Liu, 2013, p. 1) in an effort to ensure museums are sustainable in the long-term.

Unsurprisingly, many museums internationally are offering seamless experiences that connect to visitors’ everyday lives, ensuring that visitors can apply what they learn in museums in the context of daily life, and that daily life is mirrored within the museum walls. Of course, part of the mounting pressure on museums also involves breaking barriers to audience participation in order to maintain relevance to target groups and to attract new users. Such barriers include, for example, cultural, social, educational, language and attitudinal. As Simon (2010) reinforces, many people do not often visit museums or are displeased from their service due to reasons including: (1) irrelevance to the visitors’ life, (2) the institution never changes, (3) the authoritative voice of the institution does not include the visitors’ perspectives or provide visitors with context for developing understanding about what is presented, (4) the institution is not a creative place where visitors can express themselves and contribute to discourse, and (5) the institution is not a comfortable, social place for the visitor to talk about ideas with friends or strangers.

As this chapter will argue, change in a museum educator’s pedagogy is required in addition to a museum’s exhibit design, in order to break barriers to participation and increase audience engagement. Importantly, such change involves promoting a combination of static/passive and dynamic/interactive components to interpretation (Liu, 2013). This includes embracing technology and interactive exhibits in museum learning experiences, which largely appeals to the K-12 education audience (Kidd et al., 2011; Meecham & Stylianou, 2012). This audience forms the chief ‘business’ of museums and are adept at interactive media, such as the Internet, smart phones, tablet technology and online games, so far rendering these tools an attractive option for museum educators to use in teaching and learning programs. Whilst handheld guides with audio tours, applications on smart phones that feature multiple functions such as tour guides, information on exhibits in multiple languages and gallery maps are already popular tools being used in exhibit design to enhance art interpretation, empathy and context to displays – they lack emotional and sensorial engagement.

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