CONFERENCE REVIEW

The Educational Museum: Innovations and Technologies Transforming Museum Education. The Benaki Museum, Athens, 17 October 2013

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The main topic of *The Educational Museum: Innovations and Technologies Transforming Museum Education* conference, third in a series of conferences organised by the Benaki Museum in partnership with the American Embassy and the British Council in Greece,[1] was the use of technology and social media as means of transforming museum education and, sometimes, funding museum exhibitions and educational programmes. Among others, the conference aimed to discuss the use of digital applications such as Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest and Kickstarter by museums in order to attract a wider audience, interpret their collections and even fund their programmes.

The conference started early in the morning with Angelos Delivorias, Director of the Benaki Museum, and Tony Buckby, Director of the British Council in Greece, welcoming the participants to the conference. Speakers included representatives from well-established museums and cultural institutions in the UK, US and Greece, which have embedded Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in their educational programmes. Irini Papadimitriou, Digital Programmes Manager at the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) and Head of New Media Arts Development at Watermans Art Centre, talked about the digital programmes that are on offer at the V&A. Papadimitriou challenged our perception over what constitutes the 'making of art' by introducing her team's objective to invite visitors of all ages to learn through 'breaking, remaking, and hacking', that is disassembling. Wendy Woon, the Edward John Noble Foundation Deputy Director for Education, who also oversees all educational departments at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), discussed the use of social media and mobile applications by museums and cultural institutions in order to widen participation and reach wider audiences. Woon particularly suggested that the ubiquitous use of social media and Web 2.0 changed fundamentally the ways in which people communicate and learn and thus, in this public-curation movement that extends the web realm, we as educators are invited to look at our audiences anew. This means, that museums should take visitors' preferences into consideration when designing educational activities and transform

their galleries into places for social outings. To address this need and change in preference, MoMA has extended its online presence from its daily updated website to live streaming, live tweeting, applications for mobile phones, Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCS), and Google Hangouts with members of its community that cannot pay a visit in person. Furthermore, Woon acknowledged the fact that MoMA is among those cultural institutions that welcomed social media and its use in its galleries: instead of arguing over visitors using their phones, MoMA interviewed them in order to find out how they are using them. The results of this research led to the development of a number of applications, available to download for free. Inspired by the results of this research, MoMA also integrated a camera in its application so as to facilitate visitors' social sharing (MoMA 2013)

Apart from the case of the art museum, Dan Bird, the Exhibitions and IT Director for the At-Bristol Science Centre, offered delegates a taste of this science and discovery centre by bringing into discussion the design, development, and implementation of educational interactive exhibits. Bird advocated the view that digital technologies can support and extend the ongoing interactions with visitors by allowing them to participate in the process of meaning making, i.e. learning. Bird referred to the 'ANIMATE IT' exhibition (At-Bristol 2013) and its online platform that introduces the visitors to animating techniques and invites them to edit their videos online and offsite, and the touring exhibition 'In the Zone' (At-Bristol 2012) which allowed visitors to create their own videos of their interaction with the interactive exhibits of this exhibition.

Apart from presenting their institution's innovative programmes and the adoption of social media, several of the presenters focused on the history and development of the organisations they represent so as to inspire others. Jeri Robinson, Vice President of the Early Childhood Initiatives at Boston Children's Museum (BCM) which this year celebrated its 100-year birthday, gave a very inspiring and moving talk about the possibilities that may arise from the active collaboration between museums and public libraries as well as other institutions. Specifically, following a brief account of the BCM's history which highlighted the fact that BCM has changed throughout the years as a result of societal, political and economic

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changes, Robinson introduced her own projects and initiatives at BCM, including the development of the *PlaySpace* exhibit, the creation of the *Boston Cultural Collaborative for Early Learning* and the *Families First Parenting* and *CountDown to Kindergarten* programmes. Robinson's aim was to encourage and inspire the conference's delegates through the examples given as well as to remind them that despite the current cuts in public funds, museums have to persevere and address all these 'difficult questions' and issues that may arise among their communities. In this vein, Robinson concluded her talk with a video of the inspiring and encouraging speech that Michelle Obama gave during BCM's awarding of the 2013 National Medal for Museum and Library Service, an award given annually by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) to American libraries and museums with outstanding service to their communities.

Following Robinson's talk, Teti Hatjinicolaou, President of the ICOM Hellenic National Committee, referred to the history and agenda of the ICOM Hellenic National Committee and the two national programmes, the *Museum–School* programme that ran from 1988 to 2002 across Greece, and the *Melina* project (1995–2001), which successfully introduced educators and students to the museum world and vice versa. Both talks invited participants to reflect upon the progress that has been made in the field of museums and museum education, particularly to remind them that museums have always been facing challenges throughout their history as a result of cutting funds and/or societal changes. A further encouragement was offered by Woon who used the quote by Rahm Emanuel 'You never let a serious crisis go to waste', suggesting that museum practitioners take a more positive attitude towards the ongoing budget cuts.

Additionally, a panel of representatives of Greek cultural organisations (Cornelia Xatziaslani, Head of the Information and Education of the Acropolis Restoration Service of the Hellenic Ministry of Culture; Zabel Mouratian, President Board of Directors, Hellenic Children's Museum; Alexandra Tranta, Museum of Piraeus Bank Group Cultural Foundation; Marina Tsekou, museum educator at the National Museum of Contemporary Art in Athens; Dimitris Protopsaltou representing the Future Library organisation, and Irene Gratsia from the Monumenta NGO), discussed the importance of training school educators; referred to the available online educational museum activities/sites in Greece; raised the urgent need for museums to be more inclusive, especially when it comes to teenagers and hard-to-reach social groups; and introduced the Future Library project, a non-profit organisation, funded by the Stavros Niarchos Foundation, aiming to transform the Greek public libraries into centres of creativity, innovation and learning, and the Monumenta NGO for the protection of natural and architectural heritage in Greece and Cyprus to the delegates.

By bringing together professionals from the US, the UK and Greece, the conference provided a platform for dialogue and sharing best practices. Although sharing expertise is among the most fundamental building blocks for pushing boundaries and learning from each other, the examples provided throughout this conference can only be treated as points to ponder and be inspired by: seeing how things turned out for Boston Children's Museum since it opened its doors to the public; how an art museum such as the V&A reaches out and challenges its audience to learn through hacking and breaking; becoming aware of current progress in the field of museum education in Greece and learning about innovative projects revamping our old-fashioned museums and libraries; getting behind the scenes of the MoMA museum and its numerous platforms through which the museum comes closer to its public; and realizing the power embedded in interactive exhibits not only in terms of learning, but also of enjoying ourselves, getting inspired and becoming motivated to go back, re-create and learn more.

This conference was indeed one of the few opportunities for museum practitioners and educators to meet with and learn from each other. One of the issues successfully addressed during the conference was the shift in the role of the museums: from being for 'something' to being for 'someone' (Weil 1999). The cases of MoMA, At-Bristol, the V&A and the Future Library all highlighted the need to reach a better and holistic understanding of visitors, their agendas and needs in order to serve them better. Apart from presenting what these institutions have accomplished, it would be interesting to discuss also how they have accomplished their progress and how they use social media, digital applications, audience development in order to learn from their experience. One can easily understand that by simply adopting social media and digital technologies would not magically lead to attracting more visitors. Instead, social media, Web 2.0 and interactive exhibits open the museum to the public and their use and implementation should be crafted on the understanding that there is a mutual relationship between museums and their public, which these media reinforce and facilitate. Knowing how many people are using such applications allows us to grasp only half of their potential and function (Chan 2008). Getting an in-depth insight on how visitors use the available digital resources and what purposes they think these serve will allow museums to better understand the needs of their visitors and subsequently, address them efficiently while keeping the cost low.

Video recordings of seven of the sessions are now available for viewing: http://www.blod.gr/lectures/Pages/viewevent.aspx?EventID=279

Notes
[1] The first conference of this series, titled *Socially Networked Museums: New media and Innovative Ideas for Audience Development in Museums and Cultural Institutions* aimed, together with the programme *CULTURAL ENVOY*, at crafting synergies between different cultural organisations while fostering and widening inclusion and audience participation through the use of new technologies. During this two-day conference (27 and 28 September 2011) at the Benaki Museum in Athens participants were invited to learn more

about the design and production of technologically advanced interpretive resources as well as the different strategies developed in order for museums to become more inclusive (Benaki Museum 2011). The following year, the American Embassy and the British Council in Greece in partnership with the Benaki Museum, organised the one-day conference, titled *The Entrepreneurial Museum: Revenue and Capacity Building Strategies for Self-Sustained Non-Profit Institutions*, held again at the Benaki Museum. During this conference, delegates introduced and examined the implementation of a range of innovative strategies and new methods of operations that would allow cultural and non-profit institutions to reinforce their relationships with their core audience while reaching new audiences, and find alternative ways for funding which subsequently will allow these institutions to become more self-sustained (Benaki Museum 2012).

References

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