Engaging Children Online: Is there Room for the Grittiness of Social Reality?

Robin Johnston
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Abstract: Museums are venturing into the worlds of social networking as they aspire to be more participatory and inclusive of children and young people. However, there are challenges in presenting the grittiness of social reality in online exhibition spaces. On the one hand, museums face political pressures about what are deemed to be accepted narratives for public education; on the other hand, they appear to be constrained by preconceptions about what is appropriate material for children. This paper discusses such tensions with reference to museum websites, particularly those focusing on one of the iconic topics of the Australian school curriculum, the gold rushes of the nineteenth century. The paper reports initial and ongoing research of museum websites for children. The findings and associated discussion are significant in the current climate of debate about the teaching of history in Australia and what these debates mean for the inclusive museum.

Keywords: Museum Education, Children Online, Teaching History

Introduction

In Australia, there is evidence that the growth of online visitors to large well-known museums has been exponential. As is shown in the sheer numbers of visitors accessing online museum sites, online exhibitions have the potential to reach a wide audience. In recent years, for example, the Australian Museum attracted over 280,000 visitors (Australian Museum, 2004); online visitors as indicated by the numbers of logged user sessions vastly exceed this number and indicate the huge potential for expanding the ‘reach’ and potential significant role for such institutions. In 2003–2004, for example, the Australian Museum logged over 8 million online user sessions (Australian Museum, 2004).

Given this massive increase in visitor numbers, museums must find the potential for including children and young people as audiences in their online offerings quite tantalising. For ‘digital natives’, many of the children and young people of today, the online environment is an everyday aspect of their lives (Thomas, 2007; White & Wynn, 2008, p. 210). However, there is evidence also of a digital divide (Montgomery, 2007, p. 210; White & Wynn, 2008, pp. 218–219) that results in the exclusion of other children from access to online resources and forms of communication which are taken for granted by an increasing number of children, particularly those in the affluent and developed world. These tensions regarding access to online resources must concern museums that aspire to be inclusive of highly diverse audiences. As Witcomb (2003) has suggested, the uptake of online technologies is contributing to debates about museum pedagogies and the potential for museums to fulfil their mission of visitor participation and involvement in learning through online interfaces. This paper seeks to contribute to these debates through an exploratory review of online museum sites for children and young people.

The research follows on from PhD research (Johnston, 2003) which explored the kinds of field sites teacher education students selected for children’s learning. The research led to a discourse analysis of curriculum documents; it appeared that the now largely superseded Studies of Society and Environment (SOSE) learning area, one of the nationally framed key learning areas developed in Australia (Australian Education Council, 1994), was highly influential in shaping the students choices of locations for children’s learning. Although new curriculum blueprints have now replaced these earlier documents, the findings are important for any ongoing evaluation of curriculum blueprints produced.

Findings from the PhD study suggested that the earlier curriculum blueprints tended to promote a biased, predominantly hegemonic, anodyne and sanitised curriculum and a fear of incorporating highly contested, controversial issues. In drawing on the dominant discourses of these documents, the student participants of the study tended to avoid sites they thought were contentious and therefore unsettling for children. In addition, the student participants promoted a highly controlling pedagogy, thus unwittingly aiming to constrain the engagement of children and young people as active agents in their learning. As Thomas (2007) has indicated, however, there is evidence that young people are active agents in the online environment and participate in online environ-
ments in highly sophisticated ways. Moreover, for the young people in Thomas’ research, online and offline worlds are ‘one’: “For children, there is no such dichotomy of online and offline, or virtual and real — the digital is so much intertwined into their lives and psyche that the one is entirely enmeshed with the other” (Thomas, 2007, p. 3).

This paper is set against this backdrop of policy blueprints and constraints as well as the contemporary worlds of children and young people. It also considers current perspectives on the teaching and learning of history. Through online visits to selected museum websites the study on which this paper is based seeks to explore the stated purposes of the museums, the way in which the young learner is perceived and the kinds of materials available for audiences of children and young people. The work follows on from an earlier enquiry of museum pedagogies and curricula conducted as part of this exploratory research (see Johnston & Bradby, 2007).

**Museums Online: Some Trends**

It is suggested that audience participation leads to new forms of knowledge creation through unbounded communities of learning (Dillon and Prosser, 2003). For example, in Australia, exhibitions based on community outreach programs include a diverse range of voices through their inclusion of stories connected to people’s life experiences and perspectives of contemporary issues. Two such participatory sites are the National Museum of Australia’s (n.d.a & n.d.b) Pass the Salt and Wentworth Basin Bytes (see also Johnston & Bradby, 2007).

Art galleries provide children and young people with the opportunity to post their own responses to art works selected for online exhibition spaces. For example, the Tate Modern (n.d.) online site, Tate Tales, is an exhibition space which invites children to write stories with reference to a painting selected as a catalyst for comment. Although the children’s responses to the Tate Modern as indicated by the ones posted on the website have included those from children in countries beyond the borders of the national institution, most of the postings are from children in the developed, English speaking world; predominantly, these stories are from the United Kingdom and the USA but also from Spain, Portugal, Iran, Australia, China and Singapore. The last four in this list each have one entry only. It would appear that in connection with this website, information flows are largely one-way. As Johnston (2006, p. 14) suggests, “this site could be seen as fostering a Western cultural hegemony.”

Museums also appear constrained by access to technology which is as lively as young people would find in computer games. The museum sites appear to be designed also with a particular kind of child in mind. The kinds of materials on offer convey a view of the young learner as lacking in the potential to engage meaningfully with exhibits in the museum and to cognitively engage in sophisticated ways. Some sites present largely stereotypical, superficial representations and repetitive forms of engagement. (see for example, Johnston’s, 2006, critique of the Gold Rush interactive resource produced by the Curriculum Corporation & education.au limited, 2003). These resources are disappointing in their representations of the past and appear to be designed with a deficit view of children’s capacities for learning and online engagement. Such sites tend to repeat the constraints noted in relation to the PhD research indicated earlier in this paper.

Some museums have attempted to address these kinds of limitations by including young people as curators of the online museum space. The Bronx Museum in New York (Bronx Museum of the Arts, 2006), for example, is promoted through the language of young people in the hope that it may appeal to their peers who may similarly be disenfranchised as museum visitors through their lack of connection with what is often a culturally hegemonic environment. Videos produced by the Teen Council in conjunction with museum personnel, for example, are available on You Tube as non-registered users of the museum. In this way, museums in areas of high poverty such as inner city New York, have attempted to extend their attempts at inclusion through the involvement of young people in the formal curatorial processes of the museum. Thus, while there are constraints evident in the engagement of young people as participants to museum environments, there are also some exciting initiatives being developed to open the pathways for visitor participation of children and young people as museum audiences, learners and producers of museum material online.

These efforts show how museums are rethinking their role and inviting the participation of young people in various ways. Most particularly, the focus on participatory forms of learning appears to follow on from efforts for museums to rethink their roles in consideration of constructivist theories of learning and of changing views of knowledge. Notably, also, the new sociology of childhood (Christensen & Prout, 2005; Wyness, 2006) as well as studies of the capacities of young people and children as competent online users and producers (Thomas, 2007) point to the great potential of young people to engage and contribute to society as active agents. Thomas talks
of the way in which young people are multitaskers who bring varying forms of so-called real and virtual communication and media engagement to their participation online.

**Further Enquiry: Museums, Young People and Place**

This paper focuses on several Australian museums in differing locations. Through online visits to these museum websites the study seeks to explore the stated purposes of the museums, the way in which the young learner is perceived and the kinds of materials available for audiences of children and young people. A sample of museum websites was visited.

As a starting point, several State and Territory cultural institutions were visited and not surprisingly, given the importance of financial support for the provision of such resources, large metropolitan and national museums tended to give a better account of themselves (e.g. The Australian Museum, Sydney and the National Museum of Australia, Canberra, the Australian national capital). A cohesive mission about the purpose of the institutions was stronger in such well-resourced institutions compared with those institutions supported by smaller populations and finances: notably, the Northern Territory and Tasmania. In this way, the digital divide extends to regional and rural Australia, not only through lack of access to reliable and fast broadband linkages but also through the provision of materials at sites peripheral to the major population centres in Australia.

In the main, museums in Australia appear to view children and young people as learners who will access materials from within educational institutions. Of the museums surveyed, the Northern Territory museum was the only one with no educational programs link from the home page. It does, however, have a link ‘For Kids’ from the Natural Resources, Environment and the Arts section of the website (Northern Territory Government, 2007). Moreover, within this location is a section ‘Information for Teachers’. Other museums indicate the trend to conceptualise the young person as a learner outside of any formal education context: the Australian Museum (Sydney) seems to encompass children as learners outside the school environment and the National Museum of Australia (Canberra) includes a Kidslink as well as an Education link from the home page. These museums, in addition to Museum Victoria, appear to view young people as an audience in their own right outside of any educational context.

Through its Sea Slug Forum the Sydney located Australian Museum (1998–2006) invites participation from young people unprompted by the school curriculum. Museum Victoria, from its Discovery Centre link from the home page is also less tied to school curriculum and embraces broader learning options through the provision of unprocessed material available for multi-age, multi-purpose learners. It appears that these museums are capable of imagining the virtual visitor as an independent entity rather than as one either preparing or following up an actual onsite visit to the museum.

It seems significant that the larger, metropolitan museums are able to provide for a virtual audience in more technologically sophisticated ways. Smaller regional museums such as The Eureka Centre and Sovereign Hill in Ballarat, an iconic goldfields city in regional Victoria, appear to cater for actual visitors to the site, however, there is limited access to primary source material such as photographs online and most materials are providing information rather than active contributions and participation online.

In the main, these two sites seem designed to appeal to the school excursion trade, an important money earner for both. Sovereign Hill’s educational sites are designed for the teacher; the website does not incorporate an educational function outside of limited material to support programs and activities accessed by visiting the museum. The Eureka Centre programs do seem to have reasonable historical integrity with one entitled the Significance of Eureka (The Eureka Centre, n.d.b), which focuses on different interpretations of the uprising, and another Debate activity: The Hall of Debate (The Eureka Centre, n.d.c) which uses role play to introduce the issues behind the narrative. However, the material made available through Educational Resources on the centre’s website is a mixed bag of mainly borrowed material. Perhaps to a lesser extent than Sovereign Hill, the website is primarily designed to encourage and support an actual visitor experience. It seems that the nature of the websites is shaped largely by lack of resourcing and expertise in online engagement. After all, schools are important contributors to the budgetary health and ongoing existence of these centres. It seems a shame, however, that these cultural institutions in a regional area do not set out to appeal to children and young people as audiences and participants.

Both centres are well placed to position themselves as iconic resource centres ideally connected to participatory democracy and engagement. The Eureka uprising in Ballarat is highly contested (Beggs-Sunter, 2003); yet, also considered to be a defining moment in the shaping of Australian democracy in the nineteenth century (Wright, cited in Rood, 2004). Although interactive resources about Eureka do exist at both The Eureka Centre (n.d.a) and the National Museum of Australia (National Museum of Australia and Ryebuck Media Pty Ltd., 2007), they tend to be one-way ‘click and respond’ resources.
The exploration of a painting available at the Eureka Centre’s website represents the Eureka Rebellion and draws attention to the actual event with actual characters whose stories highlight different and contested points of view. The National Museum of Australia provides an interactive board game with ‘snakes and ladders rules’ called Gold rush – and the path to the Eureka Rebellion. It is designed for two players who are presented with a series of choices as newly arrived diggers to the Victorian goldfields. In my view, the resource is highly biased in terms of gender. It represents the goldfields in a fairly stereotypical way and would benefit greatly from the inclusion of insights from recent histories of Eureka such as the work of Claire Wright on the women of Eureka (see Rood, 2004) and the work of Fred Cahir (1998) on indigenous perspectives to goldfields history.

In considering the sophistication of young people online, I am interested to know how engaging these resources may be. In addition, could this idea be strengthened pedagogically and the problem solving aspect of the National Museum of Australia’s interactive be enhanced by suggesting that students access primary and secondary source material and construct an actual board game for younger peers?

Furthermore, in teaching history, it is recommended that learning should be interconnected with the present and the future. Harris-Hart and Bateman (2008, p. 29) recommend temporally inclusive pedagogies that “increase the connectedness between different time frames”, “make explicit connections between time perspectives of the learner” and embrace “a student’s lifeworld knowledge” with what is being learned. My previous suggestion for students to design the board game could incorporate such temporally inclusive approaches. Moreover, the game could also make connections with the present.

Gold mining is after all a highly dangerous activity which continues to involve problem solving and one in which tussles about management and associated decision-making are ongoing. Two recent events come to mind: the Anzac Day rockfall at the Beaconsfield gold mine in Tasmania and the one only last year at Ballarat, the November 2007 rockfall which trapped 27 miners for several hours at Mt Clear (see Workers return to mine after accident, 2007). As I have asked previously about museum interactivity and resources in thinking about how current events may be represented in the future (Johnston, 2006):

Whose perspective(s) will be employed: management, workers, politicians, community members? Will there be a tendency for the event to be stylised simply as an adventure ‘escape’ story so as to appeal to a young audience, for some of whom such a representation may have little to do with the stories that have been passed down through their families and communities? Will the grittiness of social reality be lost in the telling for a broader audience, particularly if there is a fear of seeming to be contentious? My own research findings, my viewing of the gold rush interactive, along with reflection on recent events at Beaconsfield, highlight questions about how past events are to be represented for children in ways which both challenge and engage if they are not to convey a limited, and to a degree homogenised, cultural space. Do museum site planners for example have a restricted view of what is likely to be ‘attractive’?

**Conclusions: Constraints and Possibilities**

In any evaluation such as this one, it is difficult to do justice to the efforts being made by museums to offer wide-ranging resources and to be socially inclusive. Not surprisingly, but somewhat disappointingly, it appears that the larger the institution and the better funded it is, the better the chance that the materials on offer are designed to appeal to a young audience and to recognise the reality of children’s and young people’s lives now. The Bronx Museum with its involvement with young people in a Teen Council demonstrates the levels to which museums can indeed become more inclusive. Other resources appear to be designed in a ‘fairly flat manner’, even if they aim to be interactive and representative of varying viewpoints. It appears from my brief exploration of a range of websites that museums likely to appeal to young audiences are in major population centres such as New York and London.

To a lesser extent large metropolitan museums in Australia offer some interesting and valuable materials with a clear invitation and opportunity for two-way engagement. There are possibilities for extending the scope of online materials to regional centres and ensure that they become the beneficiaries of generous funding. Such a funding base hopefully would enable resourcing for these cultural centres to draw on contemporary perspectives about teaching and learning and sociology and cultural studies to inform their view of children and young people. In so doing, the centres will also need to communicate and negotiate with their local communities to bring about an acceptance of courageous forms of engagement online and a willingness to incorporate contested memories (see Beggs-Sunter, 2003) that live on to the present. In this way, there may be hope for young people to be included as active participants in their own communities and the online world of cultural institutions.
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