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people are seeking experiences and will pay for them. But John Dewey, the great advocate of experiential education, admonished that not every experience is educational. Our challenge is to take what we have and produce memorable, engaging, educational and enjoyable experiences.

#### CONCLUSION

Where does this leave us? Our grants officers are saying, "how can we demonstrate outcomes for what we do?" And the marketing people are saying "to compete, we need more compelling experiences." At one level, these seem incompatible, emphasizing content and results on the one hand and ephemeral pandering on the other. But both start with the visitor experience and the challenge to improve it. If we detach the commercialism from the conversation about experience, as Kotler did, we are left with strong educational theory that is absolutely consistent with an emphasis on effectiveness. Both of these trends shift the focus from the professional staff to the visitors.

Neither of these trends is bad for museums. We should prefer that museums be at the center of current discourse about how people spend their time and money, rather than on the periphery. We need to be able to demonstrate that people get something useful from museum exhibitions and programs. And they are more likely to learn or discover something if they are engaged.

Good intentions and a wonderful collection are not enough. We have work to do if we are to deliver on the promise of

our resources. We have to tap those resources and our creative energies, stay fresh and exciting, pay attention to the results of what we do, keep track of our successes and failures, listen to our visitors, and be attentive to their needs and expectations. We cannot be smug—funders won't stand for it; or aloof—visitors won't appreciate it. We have to accept that evaluation and marketing improve what we do, not threaten it. We must not only embrace change but also find new tools for effecting change. These trends may stay or they may pass quickly—it doesn't really matter. Their lessons will remain regardless.

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#### NOTE

This paper was first presented at the Rhode Island Docent Symposium in 2000.

## Storytelling: The Real Work of Museums

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#### ABSTRACT

This article examines the ways in which the narrative or story form generates personal connections between visitors and content and thus is ideally suited to the work of museums. Starting with a review of the qualities of narrative, the article provides specific examples of how stories and storytelling have worked in exhibitions, public programs and outreach to schools.

#### INTRODUCTION

"The Real Thing" was the theme of the annual conference of the New England Museum Association for the year 2000. Though playful, the theme reflects a serious concern in the museum field: in an increasingly competitive public arena, what can museums claim authentically as their own? While the mission, content, and methods of museums will continue to be evaluated and revised, there is one aspect of their work that will always be "the real thing" and that is storytelling.

Storytelling has been enjoying a comeback for some time. Because it supports personal interpretation and multiple perspectives, storytelling has a certain hip post-modernist appeal. And various disciplines, including psychotherapy, law, education, business and of course history, have enthusiastically embraced narrative, the more academic term for stories, as a teaching and research strategy.

A personal story—I personally rediscovered the relevance of storytelling to museum work a few years ago. As the new head of programs at the Brooklyn Historical Society, I wanted to develop exhibits that would grow and also matter to our audience. Looking for new ideas, I attended a teacher workshop given by Facing History and Ourselves, the national educational organization whose mission is to help students make connections between history and the moral choices they make in their own lives.

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The workshop was on the Holocaust; the particular session I attended was about heroism. Our young instructor began by asking us to write down our personal definition of a hero. Most of us agreed that a hero was someone who did something public, brave, and "heroic" with a capital H. Then she showed us *The Courage to Care*, a film narrated by Elie Weisel. This documentary profiles several older Europeans who as young adults had risked their lives to save Jews from the Gestapo. None of them saw themselves as heroes; they were simply doing what was right.

Afterwards I headed for the subway home. As I stepped into the car, a man dropped to the floor, writhing in a violent epileptic fit. I stood staring at him while my mind slowly replayed the lesson of the workshop: "you can help or walk away; the choice is yours to make." I turned to a young man on my right and we quickly agreed to separate and look for help. Within moments, an MTA official with a walkie-talkie arrived, leaving us free to continue on our way.

The entire incident lasted only seconds, but it changed forever how I think about our work. Over the next several years I sought to develop exhibits, including one for Facing History called *Choosing to Participate*, which could provide for visitors what the subway incident had for me—a genuine "aha!" moment, a transformative experience. Inevitably, I've learned that "transformative experiences" are as hard to create as they are to define, but I have become increasingly convinced that storytelling often lies at the heart of them.

#### THE NATURE OF NARRATIVE

**The academic perspective**—Psychologist Jerome Bruner has extensively explored the meaning of narrative and its fundamental role in creating and interpreting human culture. In *Acts of Meaning* he discusses two characteristics of storytelling that relate directly to museums (Bruner 1990). The first is about how people learn. Human beings are natural storytellers; they make sense of the world and themselves through narrative, a form shared both by storytelling and history. From the time they are very young, children learn that the way to integrate their own desires with their family's norms and rules is to construct a story about their actions. This push to construct narrative, Bruner maintains, shapes how children acquire language. And the habit persists into adulthood as a primary instrument for making meaning. These storytelling skills insure our place within human society, and probably imply that information not structured as a narrative is more likely to be forgotten.

There even is a narrative to illustrate the fundamental nature of narrative. Anthropologist Gregory Bateson reportedly told a story about a man who wanted to understand how the mind works and asked his computer "how do you think?" After a long pause, the computer printed out its answer "that reminds me of a story" (Spock and Leichter 1999).

Secondly, stories have a point of view. Bruner (1990) says that stories can deal at the same time with the canon—what we have been taught to believe in—and the exceptional, the violations of this canon. He believes that to tell a story is to take a moral

stance, even if it's a moral stance against moral stances. Something happens in a story—something is wrong in the world—and its resolution serves to help us sort out our basic values and beliefs. We make the concrete details of the story represent something much larger. Bruner maintains, for example, that the story of Napoleon's Russian campaign becomes a narrative about the tragedy of overreached ambition. Similarly, the stories of the Holocaust-era rescuers became, for me, a reflection on the significance of everyday choices.

Another scholar whose work argues for the use of storytelling is Kieran Egan, whose field is education and curriculum development. Egan maintains that anyone, even very young children, can acquire historical knowledge if it is presented at the developmentally appropriate level (Egan 1983, 1989). For instance, under seven years, children are interested in binary opposites—good and bad, big and little, love and hate—and they derive meaning from affective association with one of the pairs. The story of slavery, a struggle between good and evil, would appeal to children at this "mythic stage." As they mature, youngsters maintain their fascination for opposites but want their heroes to be real people who have overcome genuine adversity; it was for this age group that Random House in the 1950s published its popular series of historical biographies, the Landmark Books. Eventually, with maturity, comes an understanding of the complexity of the historical process and one's relationship to it.

However, as Egan points out, these discrete stages build on each other and thus never completely disappear: *Affective orientations to binary opposites . . . are not simply childish and inadequate ways of thinking. They will later be controlled by more sophisticated 'paradigms' but they will remain absolutely basic and essential* (Egan 1983: 76). In other words, this is why *Star Wars* isn't popular merely with seven-year-olds. Like many stories that work cross-generationally, it begins with and builds on the foundational "mythic" stage.

**A storyteller's perspective**—Garrison Keillor, not a scholar but certainly a master storyteller, says that storytelling is ultimately more about the listener than the narrator:

I find that if I leave out enough details in my stories, the listener will fill in the blanks with her own hometown, and if a Freeport girl exiled in Manhattan hears the story about Memorial Day, she'll put it right smack there in that cemetery with those names on the stones, and she may think of her uncle Alcum who went to France and didn't return, and get out her hanky and blow. I'm not the reason she's moved, he is. All I do is say the words: cornfield and Mother and algebra and Chevy pickup and cold beer and Sunday morning and rhubarb and loneliness, and other people put pictures to them (Keillor 2000).

More than anything else, then, stories are powerful because they do not fill in all the blanks. They open up a space into which the listener's own thoughts, feelings, and memories can flow and expand. They inspire an internal dialogue and thus ensure a real connection.

## STORYTELLING IN MUSEUMS

The power of narrative is no secret in the museum world where various forms of storytelling have long been employed to engage visitors. However, some approaches—those, I believe, which embody the essence of narrative—have proven more effective than others.

**Storytelling in exhibitions**—"Object theatre" is an exhibition strategy, akin to the old-fashioned sound and light show, which uses computer technologies to create multimedia and multi-sensory contexts for museum objects. They are designed to bring objects to life without necessitating a hands-on experience. Object theater was pioneered in the 1980s by Tazuo Miyake at Canada's Science North. Sitting in a darkened room visitors watched as the night sky slowly brightened above their heads and a child's tremulous voice began to sing "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star." From that simple but magical beginning, object theatres were developed at the Minnesota Historical Society, The Children's Museum in Boston, the Connecticut Historical Society, and elsewhere. More or less explicitly narrative in style—they may employ multiple story lines—object theatres rely on the power of narrative to make connections between museum artifacts and images and visitors' lives and memories.

One of the most compelling object theatres was in *Families*, an exhibition at the Minnesota Historical Society. Called "Everything Must Change," it had a spare and simple set: a piano with various framed family photographs, a suitcase with a man's coat folded on top, a kitchen table with a birthday cake. The story begins with a home movie of a toddler blowing out his birthday candles and ends with an elderly man doing the same. In between visitors hear short narratives, all first person and authentic, about moments of loss and change in the human cycle of life. As each speaks, the appropriate photograph or other artifact lights up. Framed by the song, "Everything Must Change," these universal experiences resonated deeply and emotionally with visitors, many of whom could not watch it dry-eyed.

Also emotionally powerful but very low-tech was the storytelling strategy used many years ago at The Children's Museum in Boston. A courageous exhibition for families called *Endings, Death and Loss* included a simply illustrated and sparsely written story of "The Day That Grandfather Died." A second level of text was also included, crafted to help adults understand how young children experience the death of someone they love. While the text for adults was instructive, the simple story was sublime because its simple language invited the reader to re-experience similar events from his or her own life.

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum also relies on narrative, albeit on a much more sophisticated and larger scale. But, like the above example, its storytelling is deliberately unadorned. Jeshajahu Weinberg, the founding director who was trained in theatre, carefully edited the exhibit text, penciling out any affective language or suggestive words—anything that would interfere with the visitors' personal, unmediated response to the storyline. He did not want to tell people how to feel, but rather, wanted to let them create their own meaning—a far more powerful experience, and, as Keillor points out, the special gift of narrative.

**Choosing to Participate**—Narrative enables people to imagine themselves in an unfamiliar world. *Choosing to Participate* is an exhibition traveling to cities where Facing History and Ourselves centers are located. Here, the narrative consists of stories about individuals and communities that must decide whether or not to support people outside their immediate "universe of obligation." The most complex of these involves the 1957 integration of Little Rock's Central High School by nine African-American teenagers. Presenting the story from the perspective of Elizabeth Fekford, a fifteen-year-old girl facing her first day at a new school, the narrative speaks directly to adolescents, the audience for whom the exhibit was designed (*Photos*, pages 61 and 62). It asks youngsters to imagine themselves in Elizabeth's shoes and to empathize with the terrifying experience of encountering the angry white mob gathered in front of the school.

*Choosing to Participate* included a "talk-back" area where visitors were invited to leave their own stories, and the exhibit was evaluated through questionnaires sent to teachers who visited with their classes. Both methods, albeit unscientifically, provided strong evidence of the exhibit's success in encouraging visitors to reflect deeply on the meaning of the exhibition's main message that "my choices make a difference."

**Telling the Story of History**—Historic house museums have also turned to narrative, often to give voice to people and communities previously left out of the historical record. For instance, in the mid-90s, the staff of The Newark Museum determined to make its upper-class, nineteenth-century Ballantine House (attached to the newly renovated main museum) more engaging to a contemporary and diverse audience. One of their many innovative solutions, developed with a team of scholars, educators and curators, was to people the rooms with an engaging cast of mostly fictional, but historically credible, characters. These figures are introduced in an orientation gallery and then encountered in "storybooks," actually book-shaped text labels illustrated in the style of Charles Dana Gibson. For instance, on the staircase landing, beneath the imposing portraits of John and Jeannette Ballantine, one meets Bridget, a fictional Irish chambermaid. Bridget marvels at how much her master and mistress have spent on portraits of themselves, realizing that if she is ever going to own a home of her own she will have to leave the Ballantines (*Photo*, page 62). The storybook in the reception room reports a conversation between Mr. and Mrs. James Baxter, principal and teacher at the Newark Negro School and pillars of St. Philip's Episcopal Church. Visiting Mrs. Ballantine to solicit a donation for church missionary work, their conversation reveals the existence of a middle-class African-American community in Newark and the extent to which late Victorian social mores—for instance, the protocol for social calls—were shared across communities (Dietz et al. 2000).

Like The Newark Museum, the Brooklyn Historical Society sought to broaden its audience base, specifically to include families. A 1996 exhibition about the Brooklyn Dodgers, in addition to several hands-on components, included the story of Jackie Robinson, a real life hero in the Kieran Egan mold. This technique helped the exhibit speak to youngsters and die-hard Dodger fans at the same time.

**Storytelling: A foundation for public programs**—Narrative in museums is most popular in public programs. Many museums and historic sites rely on interpreters employing various strategies to help visitors enter and thus empathize with a world that no longer exists. At Gettysburg National Military Park, for example, visitors may hire a professional guide to fill in every detail about the battles or listen to an actress costumed as an 1860s Gettysburg farm wife talk about the carnage she and her neighbors discovered on returning to the homes they had fled. These different approaches appeal to different learning styles and levels of expertise. Assuming Bruner is correct, the storytelling strategy (at which the guides are also often very skilled), while initially less informational, may be more likely to be remembered by visitors.

Museums often place storytellers in galleries to engage family audiences. An especially effective example of storytelling to a children's museum audience can be found on the tape "Philadelphia Stories," a compilation of interviews with museum professionals. Randee Humphrey describes being taken on an imaginary fishing expedition with her children: the storyteller ended his engaging performance by pulling a real fish out of a basket and cooking it for his captivated audience (Spock 2000).

The question for museum people is how this wonderful adventure or other stories connect the participants to the environment, exhibit or objects in the museum; this is what distinguishes such programs from, for instance, story hours at the local library.

Art museums are especially adept at using narrative to help people, of all ages, understand and enjoy their collections. The Art Institute of Chicago hosts a parent workshop called "Looking at Art Together: Families and Lifelong Learning." The instructor of this free program is a storyteller who teaches parents how to "read" art as a moment from a story and then takes them through the galleries practicing and refining this technique.

**Taking storytelling outside the museum**—Large populations of school-age children are the lifeblood of many museums. And outreach programs are a staple offering for classes that cannot visit the museum. One of the most interesting museum outreach programs for schools is "Detroit Storyliving," developed at the Detroit Historical Museum with funds from the Institute for Museum and Library Services. "Storyliving" sends storytellers and musicians into the public schools where they use the techniques of process drama, an approach to theatre that originated in England. Grounding their story in actual historic sites in Michigan, the artists/teachers lead fourth and fifth graders through their own recreation of a journey on the Underground Railroad. The students start by role-playing a group of abolitionists meeting to determine who will go down south and restart the movement. From there, they go on to recreate life on a plantation and then the journey to freedom. Each scene is set by the adults but enacted by the students.

This is but a partial list of the many ways in which museums take advantage of the special qualities of narrative to engage visitors in creating their own experience. What it does not include are the kind of false narratives some museums create to try and make dry material more palatable. Exhibits with titles like *The Story of Colonial New England* are rarely genuine narratives because they do not embody the qualities out-

lined by Bruner, Egan, and Keilor. Neither visitor-centered nor experiential, they are didactic wolves dressed in storyteller sheep's clothing.

#### STORIES ARE THE REAL THING

Stories are the most fundamental way we learn. They have a beginning, a middle, and an end. They teach without preaching, encouraging both personal reflection and public discussion. Stories inspire wonder and awe, they allow a listener to imagine another time and place, to find the universal in the particular, and to feel empathy for others. They preserve individual and collective memory and speak to both the adult and the child.

Storytelling is an ideal strategy for realizing the "constructivist museum," an environment where visitors of all ages and backgrounds are encouraged to create their own meaning and find the place, the intersection between the familiar and the unknown, where genuine learning occurs (Hein 1998). Stories are very much the "real thing" of museums, that kernel of authenticity that we seek to identify and preserve.

It makes sense that storytelling is appropriate to the work of a museum for museums are storytellers. They exist because once upon a time some person or group believed there was a story worth telling, over and over, for generations to come.

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