Meaningful Engagement With an Art Museum Collection

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Abstract

This article concerns the scenarios of museum education outreach that engages young people with an art museum collection. It includes examples of strategies that have been applied throughout action-research projects involving the learning experience of three different communities of young adults. The projects engaged the participants in holistic educational experiences as they explored their own narratives while engaging with art. The participants' constant feedback gradually shaped up the educational strategies of the projects, targeting their own specific interests, narratives and needs. Although the projects did not aim at providing art therapy, being

"liberating processes in themselves" (Gutierrez, 2016, p. 61) as the participants' knowledge agenda, interests and needs were prioritized, they could still have led to transformations. In view of the mentioned projects, the article points out a series of recommendations that could help to direct art museum holistic educational outreach programs.

Introduction

Art museum collections have no meaning unless public viewers can construct personal narratives around displayed artworks by sharing multiple meanings. At a time of intense social, political, and environmental changes, museums play a significant role as educational resources (Janes, 2009) that provide the public with meaningful engagement.

This article is based on three projects as part of a study I conducted in Malta during 2016-2017, which primarily concerned holistic educational strategies with reference to the art collection of MUŻA, the national art museum in Malta. My study was qualitative. Thus, the research goals did not include the amassing of quantitative data, such as measurable learning outcomes.

Given that "objects do not speak for themselves…they are given meaning" (Hooper-Greenhill, 2006, p. 236), this article concerns scenarios of museum education outreach providing young adults with meaningful engagement experiences through an art museum collection. The article describes educational strategies that have been applied throughout participatory action-research projects. The projects' focus was on providing relevance of the collection to the participants by giving priority to specific community, personal and contextual aspects.

Research Context

The projects primarily aimed to address the needs of three communities of young adult participants (aged 21-30 years). This age group is often considered to be a pedagogical challenge. Due to their unique set of multiple needs, young adults are "a difficult group for museums to cultivate" (Sommers, 2018, p. 15). Thus, they are often excluded from local cultural projects and events, which focus mainly on families, school children and teenagers. The first project was carried out with residents at a Drug Rehabilitation Centre. The second project was carried out with university students enrolled in a Bachelors in Art Education (B.Ed.) course and who had an art background. The third project was held with inmates at a Correctional Facility. Of all three communities, my expectation was that the participants of the second project, the art education students, would find the art museum collection meaningful.

At the time of the projects, the only art museum in Malta was going through relocation and reconceptualization to be converted into a community-oriented museum named MUŻA, for a planned opening in 2018 (MUŻA, 2018). Its premature closing for the public in 2016 necessitated my projects' directions to split into two approaches. The curator gave me special consent to allow participants of the first project to make use of the museum premises. Thus, one approach engaged the first project's participants directly with the collection within the museum building. The second approach involved the second project's participants in activities with reference to digital images of the collection, while the third project's participants dealt with printed images. These two approaches raised the question concerning the physical versus virtual use of the museum collection. This is further elaborated later.

The early interviews carried out with the participants before the start of each project revealed that the participants of all three projects initially rejected the idea of museum visits. Given that the second project's participants were pre-service Art teachers with an art background, this was unexpected. The participants felt that they were not appropriate visitors for an art museum. Most of them believed they would feel out of place at an art museum due to their inability to understand and communicate through art. For them, 'understanding artworks' required the ability to look at art by linking it to knowledge of historical facts and artistic techniques, an ability that, so far, they had not learned.

The participants' ability (or lack thereof) to 'understand artworks' through a lens of previous artistic and historical background marks an ingrained mentality. It probably derived from social constructs passed on from one generation to the next, leading these participants to believe that art museums were only meaningful to engage with for the few, such as artists, art collectors, academics, and art historians. This recalls what Bourdieu (1997) calls *habitus*— cultural personality rooted in family upbringing and schooling experiences. Yet, my research findings revealed that guided through a task-oriented project, the participants who lacked an art background still achieved the ability to engage meaningfully with the museum collection, as evidenced by their ability to talk confidently about their interpretations of art.

Exploring Young Adults' Goal Orientations and Learning Strategies

Studies show that adult learners are often motivated by goals such as an aspiration to attain qualifications, to advance their careers or to enhance their work portfolio, to gain knowledge or to enjoy studying, or to adjust to a different lifestyle (Aslanian, 2001; Lin & Wang, 2015). Different goal orientations lead to different learning strategies (Pintrich & Garcia, 1991). Although I did some preparatory reading about young adults' goals, the focus of my research was not on goals. My projects were designed to offer a holistic learning experience to young

adults through access to an art museum collection; that is, the projects had an intrinsic, as opposed to instrumental, focus.

This article explores the questions: Why would young adults find a museum experience meaningful? In what ways can young adults be engaged to support meaningful museum experience?

Based on his research for the J. Paul Getty Museum, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (2000) noted: "most potential museum visitors just do not know what they are supposed to do in front of a work of art" (p. 403) without some guidance. The participants in the second project, despite their art background, also used to complain that, at times, they needed more guidance and suggested that there should be museum guides available to assist visitors. Research shows that the absence of museum education staff "to engage with museum visitors leads to a failure in satisfying educational needs" (Talboys, 2011, p. 23). In addition, as reported by Bartlett and Kelly (2000), young adults often feel excluded from museums, perceiving them as unfriendly, focused on the past, and thus in conflict with their interest in present culture and identity. What if museum educators could offer programs that bridge the past with young adults' contemporary interests and multicultural identities? Since the educational strategies of my research projects prioritized the participants' needs before the national art museum's needs, they could serve as an example for museum outreach programs to provide such bridging.

In aiming to offer meaningful museum experiences and reach out to a diversity of learners, I designed the projects in collaboration with the participants. Although my study was not focused on young adult goals, I did keep their stated goals as I investigated the participants' learning strategies.

Since my study involved a participatory approach, the research projects called for multiple research methods, which eventually led to sources of multi-level data collection. The data collection depended on the collaboration, action and reflection exchanged between the participants and me as the researcher. Hence, the development of educational strategies complements the development of the study. The research tools included: participant observations; interviews with participants before and after the projects; visual elicitation and documentation; art journals kept by the participants including mind-mapping and self-evaluations; and finally, my own research journal including field notes. Additionally, I collected data concerning the current interests of young adults through an interview with the CEO of the local national youth agency.

An Engaging Learning Process

Mainly, my study's projects concerned the engagement of young adults with the national art museum collection as they created and reflected on their own discoveries about themselves, their life and art. While viewing the collection, which was mostly from the Baroque era, the participants were encouraged to question, confirm, or reject opinions about art, life, social issues or even themselves. By providing them with tasks such as choosing a theme and developing it with reference to relevant artworks, they could immerse themselves in the experience, moving beyond what they considered to be 'expected' art-observation practices. The following three examples, extracted from each project's results, indicate the participants' meaning-making within their chosen theme, (most of which reflect human needs) through engaging with the museum collection.

A participant from the first project chose the theme of 'Family'. He was inspired by two artworks from the national art collection, namely: Antonio Sciortino's *Rythmii Vitae* and Mattia Preti's *Christ on the Cross*. For him, the combination of these two works portrayed suffering and pain (Figure 1). He presented his theme development inspired by the artworks by explaining his meanings as follows:

> My family is my life…and I know I ruined it. My family suffers because of me. The painting *Christ on the Cross* and the sculpture of *Rythmii Vitae* inspired my work, because in the first I see the pain I put my family through…they suffer the cross because of me… and in the second, I see the strength of love between a man and a woman, no matter what happens…Then I developed it as a drawing using the symbol of peace…the peace when a family provides love…this is what I want to find when I am out of here…I will not ruin my family this time.

Figure 1. A participant's reinterpretation of a combination of two artworks (upper left corner and lower left corner) from the national art collection.

Figure 2a. Participant's chosen artworks from the museum collection: Matthias Stom's *Death of Cato* (left) and Valentin De Boulogne's *Judith and Holofernes* (right).
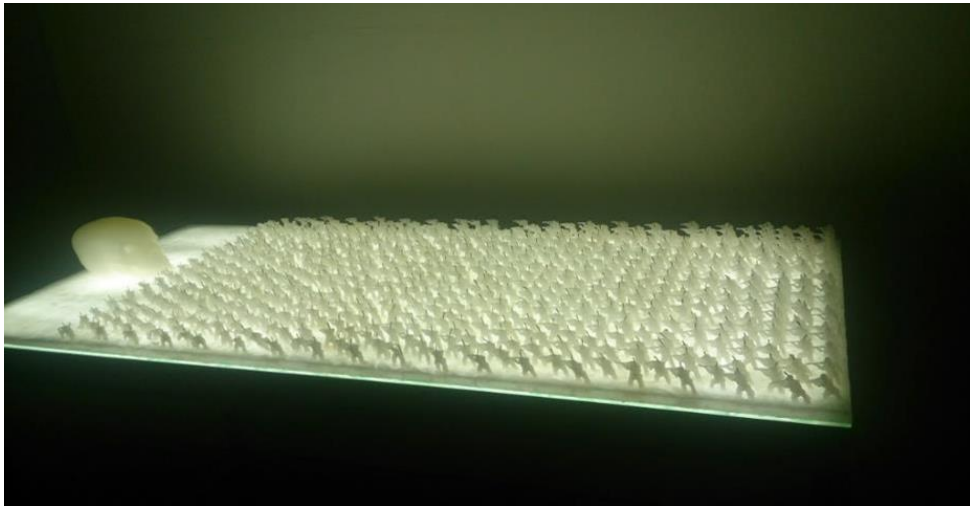

Figure 2b. The participant's exhibition of wax soldiers symbolizing the lives of the soldiers 'melting away'.

Figure 2c. Images from the participant's virtual exhibition, which merge images of his three
          chosen artworks from the collection in the background, images of his construction
          of wax soldiers and images of local roads, aimed to engage the viewer's reflection.

In the second project, a participant, impressed by the several images of 'death' in the national
collection, reinterpreted the artworks depicting massacres, like Matthias Stom's *Death of Cato*
and Valentin de Boulogne's *Judith and Holofernes* (Figure 2a). He compared these works
with the useless deaths caused by today's wars. At the start of the project, I expected he would
link his chosen theme of 'War vs Time' with the collection showing battle scenes, which are
quite numerous in the national collection. He interpreted what he felt about the reality of wars,
namely the futility of the soldiers' lives in the context of the passage of time. Figure 2b shows
an image of his exhibition, consisting of wax soldiers symbolizing the lives of the soldiers
'melting away' and a wax skull to reference death. Figure 2c shows two images from his
virtual exhibition, where he managed to fit images of artworks chosen from the museum
collection onto images of local streets, in a sort of camouflage effect on the walls and
pavement. These two images also include images of the wax soldiers that he used for his
exhibition. He expressed as follows the meaning-making developed throughout his learning
experience while engaging with the collection:

> War does not bring anything other than suffering, pain and death. It is a game used
> by governments to win or to gain power. Men are used to get what governments want.
> Unfortunately, many soldiers have lost their lives in recent wars. However, those who
> survived physically still had to cope with severe mental consequences.

In dealing with his chosen theme, one of the participants of the third project was inspired by
John Paul Azzopardi's *Curves* and Anton Schranz's *Grand Harbour* (Figure 3a) from the
national collection. These artworks somehow recalled his experience of death at sea while
witnessing his migrant friends drowning. He related *Curves* (Figure 3a) to his theme due to
the bones used in the sculpture. For this participant, bones immediately evoke death, and the

image of the sea in the *Grand Harbour* (Figure 3a) reminded him of the Maltese seas in which he had witnessed death. Eventually, he developed the theme in text and a drawing dealing directly with his tragic experience at sea (Figure 3b). The following interpretation was extracted from his art journal, which refers to the image of *Curves* as a guitar rather than a violin:

> My drawing was inspired by the guitar done with bones and I ask myself 'how many bones the artist used to create that art?' and at the same time I remember… how many people I saw drowning in water when we tried to escape Libya? My picture is about the people who lost hope till they saw a plane across the sky… From the art of Anton Schranz's *View of the Grand Harbour*, I decided to draw the sea… the experience I had about the sea had so many different faces, but the most beautiful thing is you'll get rescued in time. Thanks, first of all, to God and secondary, to the person who rescues you…

Figure 3a. Participant's chosen artworks from the collection: John Paul Azzopardi's *Curves* (left); Anton Schranz's *View of the Grand Harbour* (right).
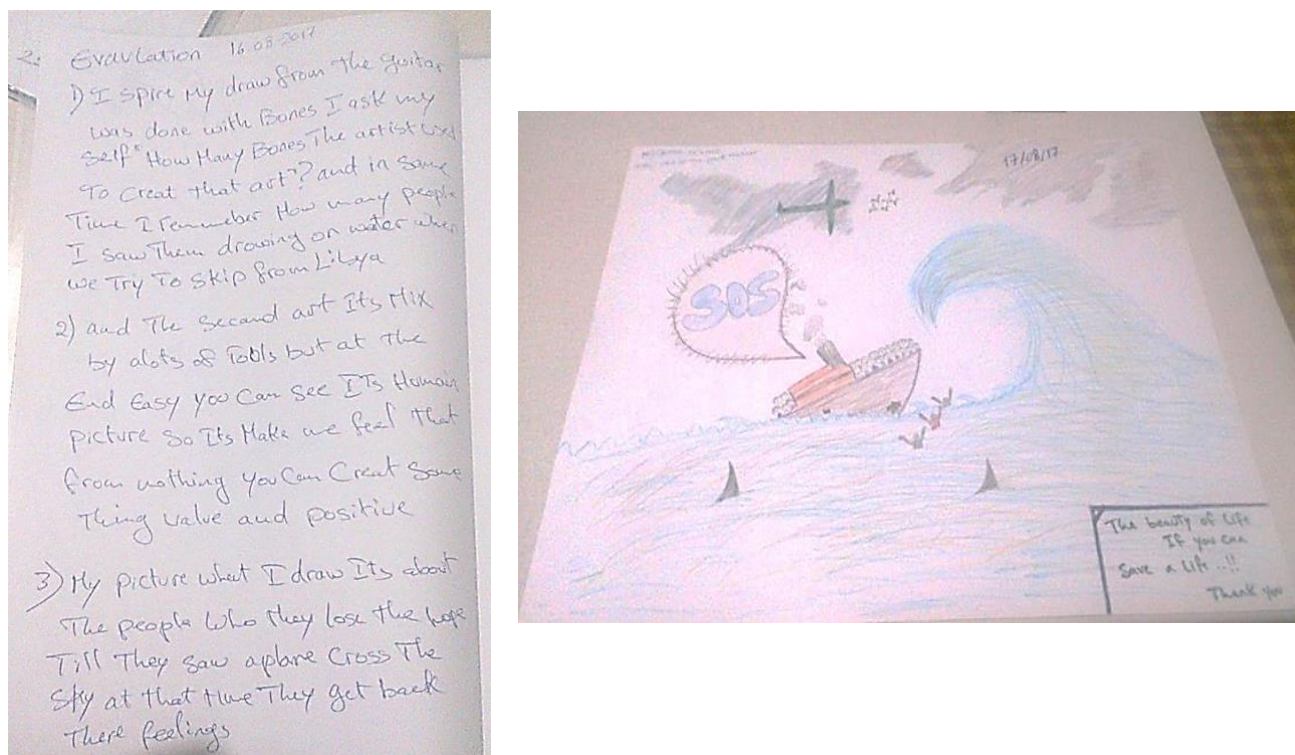
Figure 3b. Participant's reinterpretation of works from the collection.

Another example of the projects' holistic educational approach to a meaningful engagement with the national art collection was through encouraging their practice of transferable skills (thinking, collaborative problem-solving) as they explored their own narratives. This emphasis adopts Leicester University's learning development manager, Steve Rooney's (2018) suggestion that educators need to find meaningful ways to support learners' development of transferrable skills such as the presentation of their ideas and cooperating with others. In facilitating the participants' learning processes, although the projects involved a reference to the MUŻA collection, the projects were not subject-specific. I did not choose the artworks; the participants chose artworks that triggered thoughts and emotions that helped defined their concerns. This way, the projects' emphasis was neither on content knowledge, nor on the attainment of transferable skills. Most participants lacked awareness that they already owned transferable skills such as creative thinking.

Throughout the projects, evidence that the participants found their engagement with the collection meaningful emerged when they expressed their awareness of skills, they previously thought they did not have. During the first project's final interviews, a participant declared: "I learned… I have several abilities." Ultimately, my observations of participants' practice (not necessarily the attainment) of transferable skills, assisted in my investigation into the nature

and impact of holistic educational strategies. The documented self-evaluations and the final interviews indicate that through their participation in the workshops the participants felt that they had acquired certain abilities that will be useful in life. For instance, during the third project, a participant admitted: "I learned how to think deeper, how to listen fully to others, how to express myself clearly…all these skills are important for life."

Throughout the process of engaging with the collection and ongoing self-reflection tasks, which they documented in their art journals, they were able to reconsider their expectations about personal and cultural values. This, in turn, resulted in a re-evaluation of engagement with the museum collection regarding its potential for contributions to personal meaning in their lives. In the absence of a national art museum premises during the projects, although I distributed the images of the collection and projected them digitally, the participants would not have taken the initiative to refer to them unless guided by questions and tasks that demanded reference to the collection. This confirmed the need for young adults to be provided with guidance that bridges the museum collection with their interests and life to achieve a meaningful engaging experience.

Meaning-Making

For the purposes of this article, I am using the term 'meaning-making' to refer to an educational process where the participants engaged in constant dialogue not only with themselves but also with others. They negotiated their relationship with art, connections with their own life experiences and social themes that emerged while dealing with the projects' task development. According to museum education scholar Hooper-Greenhill (1999), meaning-making in museums is an ongoing process, and something we construct out of our own experiences, beliefs, and values. She explained that our views are constructed through our own interpretations or else provided by a museum curator or educator.

According to the participants, the project's meaning-making processes provided them with a deep sense of satisfaction. Thus, making sense of and expressing their own ways of seeing, while being open to having their 'seeing' challenged and further developed, served to restore their sense of well-being. Given that my study was qualitative, the focus was on tracing participants' evolving skills that enabled them to face a world that may challenge their preconceptions, resist their initiatives and ignore their desires. This echoes Biesta's (2017) assertion that the function of education is to prepare the individual's need to be-in-dialogue with a world that at times interferes with one's ingrained beliefs.

Experiencing Art Versus Understanding Art

Learning is contextualized (Falk et al., 2007). While planning and observing the workshops, I kept the following question in mind: what context am I facilitating for the participants? The engagement with the collection focused on the participants' personal context and the diverse baggage they brought with them.

I steered away from engaging the participants with the aesthetic/historical/social facts of the artworks – the intent of my projects was to facilitate their learning experience without being intrusive – to empower the participants' confidence in meaning making. Throughout the workshops of each project, the participants never showed any curiosity towards the historic or aesthetic facts of the collection. I wondered: could this be due to the Maltese school system not allocating enough time for art education, thus generating a society that does not appreciate art? People are eagerly talking about the latest TV series, football and health issues, but when it comes to art, it is mainly those who are actively involved in art who are ready to converse about it.

Meanwhile the participants of the second project, although involved in art, still showed no interest in gaining historical information about artworks. While discussing the national art collection, the participants remarked that the collection did not appeal to them and were it not for the project, they would not have referred to it. On the other hand, they mentioned that the project helped them to appreciate the collection, more especially as the collection's digital images gave them more time to look at the artworks and find connections. Moreover, they expressed their gratitude that the workshops provided them with a space to slow down. It enabled them to look at themselves, look at artworks and come up with new ideas for their theme development while reflecting on life issues. During self-evaluation sessions, the participants acknowledged that engaging in meaningful reflections and reinterpretation of the collection enabled them to unwind from the pressures of exams and deadlines. Quotes from participants' art journals included: "the workshop sessions are fundamental for me at the end of the bachelor's degree course" and "I don't have much time to reflect nowadays, so having this opportunity to see myself felt good."

Moreover, all participants of my study started to acknowledge their ability to look at and talk about artworks by interpreting them from their own perspectives. Due to the premature closing of the art museum premises, I selected around 75 artworks which were printed on foam boards and projected on screen. That way the participants could choose from my initial selection. The fact I selected artwork images based on social issues facilitated their meaningful connections between art and life. With their chosen theme in mind, they could observe and interpret artworks, question their deeply ingrained assumptions, and debate them to develop their own ideas. Thus, the strategies developed and applied throughout the projects

served to create a forum where young adults could observe artworks to reflect on, interpret, and connect while debating contemporary social issues.

I am aware there is no one right way to help a broad cross-section of young adults while engaging with art and that some of the strategies explored through my projects could be ineffective in engaging those who prefer to gain art knowledge from a regular museum program. I emphasize the importance of being familiar with participants' educational background and learning needs to adapt the educational strategies accordingly. I believe a museum outreach program that involves looking at art through personal narratives could still reach out to a wide spectrum of participants.

The Relevance of an Art Museum Collection for Young Adults

Influenced by Dewey's (1938) philosophy of experiential learning, grounded in constructivist museum education theories (Hein, 1998; Hooper-Greenhill, 2006), socio-cultural learning (Falk & Dierking, 2000; Vygotsky, 1978), and lifelong learning principles (Biesta, 2006), my research projects aimed to study the relevance of the national art museum for the participants' lifelong learning (learning throughout life). Hence by 'relevance' I mean that the museum is considered meaningful through its collection not only as a space to appreciate art but also for personal development, achieved by having the participants share interests, connect with themselves and others to generate understandings and ideas about life.

Kamps and Weide (2011) refer to museums as "an ideal platform for communication and debate… using their collections as background, they can invite discussion" (p. 32). An art museum can be a space bridging the collection with people and their lives. On the other hand, "objects do not speak for themselves… they are given meaning" (Hooper-Greenhill, 2006, p. 236). My study was an exploration of how an art museum can facilitate the public's engagement with its collection.

Considering that museums are "an ideal environment for personal development and fulfilment" (Kamps & Weide, 2011, p. 52), they can be regarded as relevant for everyone's life holistically (life-wide) and eventually transformative for life (life-long). However, Aruna d'Souza asserts that "what institutions hang on their walls or put on their pedestals is a clear articulation of who they imagine their audience to be" (quoted in Cohen, 2018, online). This parallels my projects' question concerning strategies through which the MUŻA collection could be made relevant to young adult communities. Throughout the projects, I explored the participants' ways of constructing their own 'relevance' with regard to the national art museum collection, based on their learning processes.

The projects' findings reveal that most of the participants would not have taken the initiative to visit the national art museum and engage with its collection had they not been stimulated by the projects' tasks. Furthermore, I noticed that the reason the participants considered the museum to be irrelevant did not mainly stem from their lack of interest in art. Initial interviews with the participants from the first and third projects revealed that they felt that they would feel out of place at a museum. Moreover, the participants of the second project, in spite of having chosen art as their area of study, still admitted that, initially, they found the national art collection irrelevant both to their lives and to their art studies.

The fact that throughout the initial interviews, the participants of the first and third projects hardly had a clue of the national art museum's existence provides confirmation of the fact that they were never attracted to visit the art museum. Some of them said this was because they do not understand art or were otherwise 'not good at art'. They perceived art and art museums as places suitable only for artists and art experts, thus their reason to consider the art museum as being irrelevant from a wider social context. In fact, research considers such preconceptions as "harder barriers to overcome" (Gibbs, 2007, p. 16) as they involve assumptions based on deeply held values and attitudes, strongly influenced by family, social class and school experience. Additionally, research by Bourdieu and Darbel (1991) and Lamont and Lareu (1988) shows that although public art museums seem to be culturally inclusive, much of their collections still favor a social structure that remains grounded in principles of exclusion. For instance, ideology is evident in exhibitions celebrating the triumphs of the ruling class, such as *Alexander Hamilton: The Man Who Made Modern America* exhibition at the New-York Historical Society, or *The American Presidency: A Glorious Burden at the Smithsonian* (Coffee, 2006). Thus, in spite of propounding a policy of cultural inclusivity, museums still have a reputation of being elitist institutions (Thea, 2009; Whitaker, 2009).

In her article dealing with the ways in which art museums can remain relevant in the 21st century, Cohen (2018) asserts that museum strategies to promote inclusivity should stretch beyond one's socio-economic status and education level. For my projects, I considered that an awareness of the relationship between the participants' culture and the wider social context was essential while exploring the ways in which participants made connections between their concerns and what the images of the collection suggested. In line with Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction (Bourdieu, 1974), the meanings that the participants brought with them to the projects' workshops stemmed from their social upbringing — their inheritance of the meanings generated by their family backgrounds and schooling. The participants' inheritance of meanings could be considered as a cultural capital, which, to a certain extent everyone has. However, it varies from one culture to another, and museums often favor a certain kind of cultural capital— attitudes, knowledge and values socially constructed by the dominant social group. Thus, the lack of cultural capital (as expected by museums) in the lives of some

participants strongly influenced their initial perception of the 'irrelevance' of the national art museum. However, throughout the projects, this changed as the collection's relevance was facilitated within the participants' own context.

Engaging with the national art collection provided the participants with new ways of looking at art through those ideas that they found to be relevant to their chosen themes. At times, the collection inspired them through the use of materials and techniques (e.g. the use of bones and collages), while at other times it provoked debates parallel to the themes they were developing. In dealing with their creative process of theme development, the collection served as a mirror for the participants' own interpretations of art, themselves and life. It echoed their interpretations as they reflected on, and challenged, each other's meanings regarding contemporary life issues, such as migration, relationships, unconditional love, environmental awareness and whether schooling leads to real success in life.

The final interviews and final presentations indicate that throughout the projects a non-formal transformative education had taken place. This is because the participants came to realize that the museum could indeed become relevant to their lives through the exploration of themes. They mentioned that their several interpretations of the artworks' narratives could be linked to life narratives and social issues that mattered to them. The fact that the participants explained how the collection mattered to them indicates that the project did not impose museum learning "standards set by the art professionals… who can impose a certain cultural value" (Acord, 2010, p. 448). Through the use of a constructivist approach, the projects facilitated the participants' construction of meanings by engaging with the collection, as they recalled their own multicultural values, challenging and supporting them, rather than reproducing an imposed cultural standard.

The 2017 culture track study revealed that what most impeded participation was a feeling that participants considered the cultural institution to be "not for someone like me" (Halperin, 2017). This echoed the reactions of all projects' participants during the initial interviews, when they spoke of the national art museum's irrelevance and their feeling as outsiders, since they lacked an art background. This feeling of insiders or outsiders is also mentioned by Dangschat (2009) one attributed to internal and external social symbolism housed by museums. In storing ideologies and cultural practices, museums become another collection of symbols that have been declared normative and interpreters of how and why to understand those symbolic meanings (Coffee, 2008). The three projects' findings indicate that if museums provide activities that connect to young adults' own interests and learning agendas, they can provide a sense of belonging, which is induced by connections to their life values and multiple identities.

Competing Values: Virtual Versus Physical

The challenge of finding ways to attract young adults to the physical museum is highlighted by the emergence of the virtual museum, which most participants had immediately suggested as a way for the museum to become relevant for today's young adults. It is intriguing that people instantly think of the 'virtual' as the main way to connect to today's young adults while at the same time there is an increasing demand for alternative spaces where young adults could break away from digital addiction. According to Pico (2012) young adults are not turning to new age digital trends in order to unwind. Instead, they are returning to the old world by engaging in meditation and long weekend walks. It could be argued that museum programs could likewise offer experiences that provide visitors with a space for disconnecting from digital addiction, which in some countries is officially recognized as a serious condition. For instance, in South Korea, students diagnosed with digital addiction are sent to government treatment centers. In China, militaristic government boot camps have addressed the issue and in Japan, an internet fasting camp is provided for young people (Tsukayama, 2016).

Elizabeth Merrit and Philip Katz (2013), authors of the *Centre for the Future of Museum's (CFM) Trends Watch* report in 2013, hypothesize that there is increasing realization of the consequence of excessive time spend engaging with digital technology. According to these authors, an emerging trend may shape the future of museums in the arts and culture sector as more individuals are intentionally spending time away from their phones and other forms of digital technology. This made me wonder whether MUŻA could provide meaningful engagement by using its tangible collection as a basis for providing a 'digital detox' service for digitally addicted young adults.

While discussing her observations of what are commonly considered to be the latest trends among young adults, the CEO of AŻ argued that nowadays there is "the increasing trend to detox from the internet and from Facebook addiction." Then again, not all young adults have the same opportunities and interests, so they cannot all be expected to be interested in propositions such as the digital detox. For instance, the participants brought to each of the three groups their different lifestyles and trends. This encouraged social learning due to multicultural interests, which enriched debates concerning several beliefs and ideas about art and life. This multicultural social aspect is part of the learning opportunities that MUŻA can provide through encouraging "an understanding of backgrounds and a context for social trends…in our fast-paced, busy world" (Kamps & Weide, 2011, p. 53) while young adults engage with museums' physical objects. In addition, a study concerning digital detox and art museums (Duncan, 2014), case-studies grounded in three different museums, revealed that providing museum programs that focus on physical objects rather than technological devices can lead to a more fulfilling experience.

Contrastingly, during the focus group held with participants of the second project, where I asked for feedback concerning the interview replies of the CEO of AŻ, they disagreed with the museum being used as a space for digital detox. Instead, they advocated for the digital aspect of the museum since it leads to self-directed learning, which they considered more meaningful. This recalls the promotion of museums' digital realm as a participatory model, which can lead young adults to construct knowledge, naturally stimulated through an efficient blend of art and digital technology. Throughout my projects, I took advantage of both the portability of digital imagery by applying digital manipulation strategies such as zooming into artworks and also the traditional strategies to slow down by taking time to observe and reflecting.

In Search for Meaning or Pleasure?

In a 2017 "culture tracking" study (Halperin, 2017) shows that the main reason for young adults to attend a cultural activity was entertainment. The projects' findings show that the participants found my projects concerning the museum collection relevant, although it lacked the element of entertainment. My findings support the Museum Audience Report (2018), based on a sample of 39,318 visitors from 105 museums, collected in 2017/18 that indicates that museum visitors are significantly more attracted by learning than by entertainment. This report also shows that through museum learning, visitors are most often seeking meaningful social interaction.

Since the definition of the International Council of Museums (ICOM) in 2007 included the word "enjoyment", and in the knowledge that learning is best achieved in circumstances of enjoyment (Hooper-Greenhill, 1999) most 21st century museums started to feature 'edutainment' practices (including both education and entertainment) in the design of their programs. Meanwhile, many discussions arose concerning whether edutainment practices can truly promote learning. Research shows that in many cases, learning is insufficient because the entertaining aspect often takes over (Goodlad & McIvor, 1998).

My research projects did not aim at entertainment. Although from my teaching experience I am aware that learning is achieved through enjoyment, I noticed that with all the easily accessible venues offering mass-entertainment and the increasing use of sensational digital devices, most of today's young adults seek a sense of the meaning of life and identity rather than entertainment. The participants of all three projects wished for the projects to last longer, as they found them meaningful to their life. They said the projects provided them with well-being opportunities they craved for at the time, such as social interaction, self-expression, time to slow down while looking at art, time for reflection about their life and their identities.

The process of evaluating the relevance of my study's three projects in terms of providing effective museum holistic education also presented a similar challenge, together with other challenges which are discussed in the next section.

Challenges

Wagner (2016) states that visitors not specialized in the formal study of art and aesthetics can still receive the benefit of engaging with a masterpiece meaningfully by trusting their instincts. However, according to Bartlett et al. (2000) the interest of young adults lies in the present and in the future, and since they consider museums to be preoccupied with the past, they find them irrelevant.

At first, the participants of the first and third projects felt that their lack of art education background would make them feel out of place in an art museum. The participants of the second project complained that the genre of the national art collection was irrelevant as it was mostly baroque and consequently presented practically no connections to contemporary themes. The challenge was in encouraging the participants to discover their own ways to connect the collection to their chosen themes and to life. In other words, the challenge was in making relevant what at first glance the participants considered to be irrelevant due to their deeply held assumptions. Research shows that such assumptions "are useful to keep in mind" when designing museum learning programs (Gibbs et al., 2007). In fact, by recognizing and keeping the participants' assumptions in mind, I was better able to explore those activities and tools that could encourage them to find their own ways of engaging meaningfully with the museum collection.

MUŻA senior curator argued that "from a curatorial point of view, the collection is recognized as a resource in its own right" (personal conversation). Judging from my projects' experience, despite the flexible workshop activities-that sought to make use of the collection as a resource, the links to the museum collection depended heavily on the participants' meaning-makings through their own discoveries. The term 'meaning-makings' refers to the participants' own ways of finding connections between the artworks and their chosen themes while reflecting on life and social issues. The participants took every opportunity to debate social issues with each other in order to attain clarifications. This eventually empowered them to come to their own conclusions and construct meanings. Hence, an educator can facilitate a meaningful engagement with an art museum collection, at the same time making the museum more relevant, by identifying the participants' interests and needs, and together with them, explore ways to make the collection significant for life.

Recommendations

In line with Freire's critical pedagogy theory (1978), the three projects aimed at maintaining a balanced power-relationship with the participants. We achieved this through an exchange of knowledge, engaging in dialogues to facilitate their chosen theme developments – an exercise in meaning-making related to their personal lives, inspired by chosen artworks from the collection. Hence, for meaningful engagement with an art collection, a recommended strategy is the use of questions including "what", "why", "how", "for whom", "for what purpose" and the educators' attempt to answer them along with the learners (Mahmoudi et al., 2014). In fact, the participants were constantly reminded of their significant role in the projects by being consulted on the direction of the activities. This shaping up of activities took place not only during direct consultation in focus groups, but also while they presented their plans for their theme development. It also took place during the work-in-progress, as they raised topics for discussions, through expressing their learning needs for particular art techniques and also through their feedback while engaging in self- and peer-evaluation.

At the end of this article is a suggested list of learning strategies that offers insights on young adults' ways of engaging meaningfully with a national art museum collection in a holistic manner through a creative process facilitated by an educator. To provide meaningful social interaction while engaging with an art museum collection, building a relationship of trust among participants to develop a community of enquiry is essential. They can then challenge each other's interpretations of life and the museum collection. In due course, their exchange of knowledge leads them to explore their previous beliefs and recognize misconceptions about issues concerning their identities, art, museums, and life. Eventually, new ways of looking at themselves, others, art, and life start evolving. This outcome of my research recalls the definition of museum learning as "a transformative experience" which leads to the development of "new attitudes, interests, appreciation, beliefs" (Lord, 2007, p. 17). The outcomes of the research also align with a contribution to the participants' lifelong learning purpose "for personal development and fulfilment" (Aspin & Chapman, 2001, p. 39) through engaging meaningful with an art museum collection.

Conclusion

Although the projects did not aim at providing art therapy, being "liberating processes in themselves" (Gutierrez, 2016, p. 61) as the participants' knowledge agenda, interests and needs were prioritized, they could still have led to transformations. My overall aim of the research projects was to explore young adults' own ways of using a national art collection to acquire lifelong learning through which they could make meaningful connections to others, life, and art.

The transformative approach I am proposing embraces the visitors' own narratives and meanings, inspired by their meaningful engagement with art. The museum collection itself will not change as a result of a transformative approach. The approaches used by visitors to engage meaningfully with it will change. This starts with a mentality shift towards considering an art museum collection as an educational resource for life and one that belongs to the public, rather than serving only the few.

Notes

The following list is a summary of suggestions, collected throughout the three projects through the participants' exchange of knowledge concerning their learning strategies with reference to the national art museum collection.

- choosing a theme that resonates with one's interests and beliefs will help one to reflect on oneself and life;

- drawing mind-maps guides one to explore ideas, memories, and connections;

- reflecting on ideas, plans, discoveries and discussing them with others provides development of new meanings on art and themes;

- using an art journal helps to store the creative process of ideas, observations of artworks for inspiration, reflections, connections, mind-maps, different ideas, plans, related pictures, and experiments with art materials and techniques;

- showing others pages from one's art journal facilitates the exchange of discoveries, ideas, plans, and feedback to explore alternative ideas for improvement;

- choosing works of art from the museum collection related to a chosen theme keeps the inspiration evolving;

- keeping the chosen theme in mind while exploring an art museum collection raises questions about life issues;

- taking time to slow down and observe an artwork provides more details to look at and to find connections with thoughts about life;

- while looking at artworks with others, ask questions related to one's chosen theme or theirs to discuss and develop further interpretations;

- taking time to develop an artwork provides deeper learning as the creative process leads one to think and understand further;

- presenting work-in-progress generates feedback from others, which can provide alternatives of choices of artworks from the collection, that relate to the chosen theme.

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