Towards a Language of Transformation in the Human Rights Museum

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During the summer of 2014, I spent a few days in Amsterdam. I was nearing the end of my Master’s degree in museum studies and had decided to take a brief holiday. Almost on a whim, I decided to visit the Anne Frank House. I spent most of the morning in the museum – imagining what life had been like for those living in the Secret Annexe, remembering when I had taken a group of students to see a play about Anne Frank, recalling watching films about her, and reading her diary. By the time I reached the exhibition called Reflections on Anne Frank, I was feeling raw with emotion but also this electric energy driving me to do something. I sat down to view a film presentation featuring writers, actors, museum visitors, and acquaintances of Anne Frank discussing her legacy. Emma Thompson featured prominently in the film and spoke about the person Anne Frank would have been had she lived. Her final message is “all her would-haves are our real opportunities.” Those words echoed in my head as I sat at the café. I looked around the room at the hordes of summer tourists and began to wonder, how many here would turn Anne Frank’s would-haves into their own opportunities? How many returned home and began to do things differently? Could a museum have the power to inspire people to fight for the rights of others? The idea for my PhD research was born in the café of the Anne Frank House that afternoon – I wanted to better understand the long-term impact human rights museums were having on their visitors.

The Problem with Impact

Before I delve more deeply into my research, I want to take a moment to explore this idea of impact. The idea of gauging our impact has been fore-fronted in the museum sector in recent years as more and more, organisations are being tasked with providing evidence of their value to society. This is especially the case with publically funded institutions and funding bodies which provide grants for our institutions. The highly competitive nature of grant applications and the desire on the part of governments to quantify social value has led to this impact-oriented drive and yet, when we talk about and think about impact we are often thinking in terms of numbers, easily quantifiable
outcomes, and a few anecdotes and response cards which can add some flavour and context to those numbers.

In my review of previous studies conducted with regards to the long-term impact of museums, many researchers viewed impact from the perspective of content acquisition – whether visitors had grasped and retained the messages found in the exhibitions after a specific period of time. In some instances, this referred to the desire on the part of the visitor to do things differently after leaving the museum, for example in the case of an exhibition on conservation at the National Aquarium in Baltimore, researchers found that while visitors' new attitudes and feelings about conservation persisted, they rarely took action based on these feelings. (Adelman, et al., 2000) Another study of a similarly themed conservation exhibition at the National Geographic Explorer’s Hall in Washington, DC found that visitors were ready to take personal direct action with regards to conservation but that changed in the follow-up interviews conducted six to eight weeks after the visit. (Storksdieck, et al., 2005) Both of these studies theorised that without reinforcing experiences, visitors tended to revert to previous ways of thinking and acting.

What is missing from these studies is understanding impact from the context and perspective of the visitor. Could they have been impacted in ways we were unable to capture in these studies? Does impact always have to look the same? What constitutes a reinforcing experience and might we conceive of the museum visit as a reinforcing experience in itself?

I wanted to design a study which would try to answer these types of questions and would look at impact from the perspective of the visitor. What had the visitor experienced during their visit and following their visit? What circumstances elicited memories, thoughts, or reflections of their visit? Had they taken any sorts of actions they felt were connected to their visit? What sort of connections did they make between their visit and other experiences? My goal was to find a new way to think about and talk about museum impact.
I embedded myself for two weeks at two museums sites dedicated to the promotion of civil and human rights – the International Slavery Museum in Liverpool in the United Kingdom and the Center for Civil and Human Rights in Atlanta, Georgia in the United States. While there I interviewed a random selection of visitors and, with their permission, I contacted them for a follow-up discussion six months following their initial visit. I also took the opportunity to speak with members of staff as well.

Towards and Narrative of Transformation

As I began to sift through my interviews and analyse my data, I began to realise that I was lacking an effective language to describe the experiences visitors were reporting. In essence, visitors were describing experiences of growth, change, and the emotive nature of the process. It also seemed that individuals were arriving at the museum along various points of a continuum of growth and as such, the impacts they described were very unique and dependent upon where they were on that continuum. In order to better understand what visitors were telling me, I decided to turn to the fields of transformative learning and clinical psychology.

I drew inspiration from three frameworks related to growth, change, and emancipatory learning. The first was the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Friere (Freire, 2013; Freire, 1998; Freire & Shor, 1987; Freire, 1975; Freire, 1972) who described the processes of emancipatory learning in terms of an awakening moment – conscientization – as well as a continuous cycle of critical reflection and action (praxis) to produce change in the world. His critical pedagogy provided a poetic understanding of coming to understand the systemic inequalities at work in our world and how, through dialogue and praxis we can begin to change the world. Similarly, I also drew from transformative learning theory (TLT) (Baumgartner, 2012; Mezirow, 2009; Taylor, 2000; Grabove, 1997; Mezirow, 1990) and the transtheoretical model of change (TTM) found in clinical psychology. (Prochaska, et al., 2001; Prochaska & Velicer, 1997; Prochaska, et al., 1994; Prochaska & DiClemente, 1984) Both of these stage theories of transformation and change provided insight into the
continuum I mentioned previously. Seeing transformation as a progression which, at times can become a regression or indeed a cycle, helped me form my own way of thinking about the experiences visitors has reported to me. I began to understand change as a narrative form which while being unique to the individual, often shares common features across other stories of change – a *narrative of transformation*.

Before continuing, I believe it is prudent to sound a note of caution when relying upon specific models and theories in artificially limiting ways. While models are useful tools for shaping our understanding of the human experience, when applied in rigid or unmindful ways they can be counterproductive and begin to impede more nuanced understandings of the processes taking place. While I have used critical pedagogy, transformative learning theory, and the transtheoretical model of change as a touchstone for my own approach to understanding the transformative impacts of activist museum practice, I have been careful in my approach to applying it to the data I have collected. Rather than overlaying the models on top of the visitor experiences shared with me, I have more used the idea of narratives of transformation to guide my reading of these experiences. This has allowed me to retain the richness of these experiences while simultaneously providing me with multiple lenses through which to view activist museum practice.

If we think about transformation as a narrative arc beginning with an individual’s established worldview and sense of identity and place within that view, the next part of the story involves an event or experience which causes that individual to question their view, identity, and/or behaviours. Mezirow (2009) called this a “disorienting dilemma”. In some cases, this experience might expose systemic power imbalances within larger societal structures, leading the individual to re-examine their place within those structures. This is what Freire (1972) referred to as “conscientization.” Whichever nomenclature one uses, this experience or series of experiences catapults the individual into the next part of their story. It is here that the individual engages in critical reflection about themselves and the world. This reflection might then begin to move into learning new ways of being
in the world, discovering more about specific topics and issues, or developing new skills. For some, the narrative might continue with the individual beginning to incorporate new ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving into their lives. It is essential to note that this is not a one-way narrative arc. Individuals may find after careful reflection that there was nothing wrong with their initial world-view or that their disorienting dilemma in fact confirms the world view that they already held, they might come up against barriers real and imagined which prevent them from moving forward such as time, access to knowledge, feelings of hopelessness. Every individual’s narrative is different, contextual, and is borne out of the countless experiences they have daily. This can make it very difficult to understand the museum’s role in the transformative narrative.

Where are human rights museums in all this?

Visitors come to our museums at different points along this arc, the result being that the museum visit will mean something different to each visitor dependent on where they are in their own narrative of transformation. For some visitors, it will be that initial spark which creates the disorienting dilemma in the first place. Probably my favourite story came from one of the staff members at the Center for Civil and Human Rights. He related a story of a woman who asked a question many museum staff get asked every day, “where is the bathroom?” The Center has unisex restrooms on the third floor which were nearest:

The woman caught my eye and then she [asked], “What’s with these unisex bathrooms? I find them in restaurants more” and she goes off on this whole diatribe. I said the reason why these bathrooms don’t have a gender is because one of the things that we are concerned about as the Center for Civil and Human Rights is gender equality for transgender people, for men, for women, for parents who need to breastfeed all ranges of people should be accepted here. She was like “Oh! So if I didn’t have a gender that I [felt] comfortable with I can go to either one of these bathrooms.” I’m like exactly. And she was like “Well shoot I wasn’t going to use that bathroom but now I’ll go back and use that bathroom” and she marched right over there and used the bathroom. Then I saw her another half an hour [later] . . . and she was like, “You should tell everyone” and I was like “You should tell everyone. You came in here, you changed your mind about something”. . . and she was like “Yeah I will! I’m proud of this!”
For other visitors, it informs that critical reflection already taking place, providing information, voices from the past and present, and a way to empathise with other human beings:

*I think it’s a wonderful museum and the raw power of some of the exhibits helps to foster a deeper understanding of some incredibly important (and upsetting) issues. I think that having more of a sense of the cruel realities of slavery, as well as of its unimaginable extent, has helped to deepen my understanding of a range of contemporary issues.* – visitor to ISM, 31

Other visitors may find their museum visit launches them into action, like for this woman who owns and operates her own nursing school. She told me that it was absolutely her visit to the Center which inspired her to lower her tuition fees:

*I left out of [the Center] and wanted to know what can I do for the people in the communities? So when I got back to my school I decreased my prices for that community and the kids in the class . . . cried and they were like, you know we’ve been struggling trying to pay for this.* – visitor to CCHR

Other visitors already involved in community projects, and human and civil rights work, find their visits provide a re-affirmation to continue their work towards creating a better future:

*I do a lot of community service work so sometimes because things can be so political you know you’re like I’m not dealing with that anymore I’m going home. But you know it gives me the motivation to keep going. To stay there and to keep going and not let those people that are there for the wrong reasons to deter me from being there for the right reasons.* – visitor to CCHR

There are, however, others who even after visiting our galleries will still not be ready to confront inequalities. For example, this visitor responded in this way when asked if her visit had inspired her in any way:

*No. I think I’m in the same place as I was when I came in. Obviously [slavery is] not right.* – visitor to ISM

While we cannot predict where each individual who walks through our doors is on their journey, we do know that we will have visitors from all points along that journey coming to our museums. Our museum will be something different to each of them, we may catapult some of them far along that narrative arc and some might remain where they are for the moment and the museum may become, as one visitor put it:

*one contributing factor. It's one thing where . . . you become aware of an issue that you didn't necessarily know much about and then learning that it still*
continues to be an issue today. And so . . . that combined with other experiences, number one, it provides context to other experiences that you have and number two, it nudges you in a certain direction to perhaps doing something about it, getting actively involved. – visitor to ISM

Conclusion

Throughout my research process I have continued to return to the idea of stories. Each person has their own story into which their visit fits. That narrative is unique and is perpetually being developed as he or she has more experiences. It occurs to me that these stories are not so different from my own. Mine begins with a visit to the Anne Frank House and so far it has led me to conduct this research and to be standing here in front of you. In essence I’ve been on a journey to find a way to describe my own experience and in the process to help museums find a better way to connect to their visitors and nudge them onto pathways which will hopefully lead to a more just and equitable society.

Bibliography


