

Challenges for Interviewing Subjects and Subsequent Analysis for Sociocultural Context of Museum Education

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Abstract

Social-cultural context in museum education is a crucial part of studying out of school learning. This is because, amongst the average American citizen, only 5% of their lives are spent within a traditional school environment (Falk & Dierking 2010), and thus, most of the learning that is occurring out of school are done in other environments, usually within the boundaries of one's own local community or environment, museums included. But what is the best way to understand the socio-cultural contexts of research, especially to construct a narrative of experience within a museum exhibit amongst the audience members? In this white paper, understanding the issues of interviewing subjects in this mode of research to comprehend socio-cultural context is explored through different scholars in the museum education field, with a specific focus on the construction of narratives coming from interviews with audience members inside museums.

Keywords: Social-Cultural context, museum studies, out of school learning, communities, and museums

Why Interviews and Analysis for Sociocultural Context

Attention to the sociocultural contexts to shape learning environment occurs across multiple types of learning environments, including formal and informal learning situations. In this program of research, informal learning that happens as participants visit museums will be regarded, and the sociocultural context in which that informal learning occurs. I give specific focus to the evolution of the sociocultural context created in the museums and how this affects subsequent learning.

Sociocultural context is the influential setting in which human action is created and facilitated (John-Steiner & Mann, 2002). This can also include the different makeups of background of participants, including ethnic background, socio-economic status, and education. Therefore, in study, socio-cultural context can play a role in how researchers can understand visitor behavior and learning in museums. Socio-cultural context affects comprehension affect comprehension of the learning environment present. In the case of museum education, it regards these illustrated backgrounds of their visitors, and their subsequent actions and interpretations as a result of that context.

Unlike schools, which specifically group individuals from different contexts into unified age groups, museums attract a large, diverse group of crowds. These crowds offer researchers a different opportunity than a traditional learning environment might, with the vast variance of ages, economic status, ethnic and racial background, and educational background. Additionally, unlike traditional learning contexts, such as the classroom, where the culture is often shaped by a teacher and curriculum (Barab et al, 2007), educators and defined directional activities are usually not available for learners within the museum setting.

A sociocultural approach to studying learning not only notes comprehension of the subject at hand, but also considers behavior to advance understanding of how learning happens. The importance of this as a program of research is that a sociocultural view of the context gives a greater in-depth look into the personal and social issues that visitors bring with them to the museum learning environment. This can affect how visitors engage with inquiry, as well as how the experience the overall environment of the exhibit and museum (Falk & Storksdieck, 2010; Gutwill & Allen, 2007). By better comprehending how visitors behave and what experiences they bring with them in a museum, attending to the sociocultural context can better assist researchers in creating exhibits that better engage their visitors.

This focus of sociocultural context gives researchers the opportunity to comprehend the different comprehension that museum visitors will have within the museum learning environments. Previous experiences with the subject, personal interest, and the importance of the subject play a role in comprehending sociocultural context in the motivation and learning experience of diverse visitor populations. The application of examining the sociocultural context of participants also allows researchers to better comprehend how visitors will engage with the inquiry activities set out in multiple experiments, as seen throughout the trajectory of the program of research (Allen, 1997; Allen, 2004; Gutwill & Allen). If researchers can understand what learners bring with them and how this influence how they learn within the museum context, we can better create exhibitions that bring the person closer to the content.

In addition to comprehending different backgrounds, sociocultural context also regards the difference social makeup that compromises visitor understanding of the affordances of the learning environment. Both the history of the visitor and the social interactions that they interact within the museum impact their learning. As seen throughout the research, this also includes the

social atmosphere constructed by groups within a museum exhibit (Allen, 1997; Gutwill & Allen, 2003). The social atmosphere can be created by either a school group (Gutwill & Allen, 2003), or a social group attending the exhibit, such as a family or informal group (Falk & Dierking, 1992; Falk & Storksdeick, 2010). This social atmosphere can have a positive or negative impact on the group engaging within the activity set out by the researcher (Allen, 2004). This further highlights the importance of studying sociocultural context in the museum, as comprehending the different social makeup of visitors' helps researchers understand how inquiry is applied in these learning environments.

Individual Interviews

Conducting interviews would assist in comprehending the sociocultural context of museum education with individual subjects. Since the visitors' experience in a cultural museum is more personal than in a science museum, this method will allow the researcher to better obtain this information. This method allows a researcher to better comprehend the context in which the singular participant is having within the learning environment. Unlike observation of groups in a museum context, observing individuals in a learning context lacks the verbal component that is part of many group observations (Allen, 2004). Because individuals do not have the interaction observed with groups in the exhibit, interviews will need to be conducted in order to better understand the learning process of visitors. Additionally, this allows the researcher to better understand the thought process and comprehension of the individual's experience, both within the exhibit and outside of the exhibit as well.

Currently, this type of research method with comprehending individuals' learning experience is already being conducted within the museum setting. Cohen (2011), in his project at the Illinois Holocaust Museum, researched sociocultural context in Holocaust museum education

by performing one-on-one interviews with docents before they begin their training and practice as tour leaders in the museum. One of the reasons for doing so was to better regard how the emotionally charged exhibits and educational methods within the museum had affected their performance and methodology as educators. As a result, by regarding the sociocultural context in which the docents viewed their experience with both the Holocaust and the museum, it gave the researcher the answers as to one aspect how sociocultural context affected the museum experience for visitors.

Narrative Analysis

Allen (1997) suggested that an ongoing narrative amongst visitors during their museum experience might bring more insight to museum education. Additionally, in other learning environments, narrative present in an educational setting offers stories and conditions that are normally not present within other types of research (Schaafsma & Vinz, 2007). Knowing this, utilization of narrative within a museum would give better insight into the comprehension of the exhibit by visitors. This is especially so with the focus on sociocultural context, as it allows the visitors to focus on their own experiences as well as their current experience within the museum exhibit. This was also explored in the final summary of Allen's Inquiry Games as a possible continuation of the research in the future (2010). However, this application of research methodology was not looked at further in any of Allen's subsequent articles.

Conducting this research method would be done with an open paper for visitors to write on, and record both their experiences and their feelings within the learning environment. This method would be simple, inexpensive, and not possess technological issues that visitors might have when using handheld devices, such as distraction or confusion with the technology.

Some prompts that would highlight the narrative that would prompt visitors in this scenario would be:

- Why did you come to this museum? This exhibit?
- Describe how you feel within the exhibit.
- Have you felt this way before? Where?
- What message does this exhibit have for you?

With this program of research, narrative can be regarded in a substantial way that can give better insight to the sociocultural context of the museum participants.

Arguably, this idea of a written, ongoing narrative may play a role in giving further insight into a visitor's personal reflections regarding their learning experience. This method has been explored in other contextual issues facing a subject that has personally affected the narrator, including cultural or historical issues (Smith, 2012). Comprehending this personal reflection has been challenging with other methods of research in sociocultural context (Schaafsma & Vinz, 2011). But, through the narrative model's focus on the individual's experience, this research model can better reflect the background and issues that the individual faces while within the museum. While observational methods might give insight to a visitor's behavior, they do not regard if a visitor conducts themselves across multiple learning environments in this fashion.

Technical Challenges

One of the ongoing challenges that are present within obtaining subjects for interviews—whether within a group or as individuals—in the museum setting is their reluctance to participate (Allen, 2004; Gutwill & Allen, 2010). This is due to multiple reasons of the setting,

such as a visitor being preoccupied with an exhibit, busy with social activities, or disinterested within the museum (Falk & Dierking, 1992). This challenge only increases when faced with a learning environment that is especially perplexing to a visitor (Allen, 2004), or emotionally unsettling to the visitor (Cohen, 2011). When faced with overwhelming sensitive issues within the museum, a visitor might be extraordinarily apprehensive in taking part in an interview, especially if the exhibit is overwhelming in its message and format.

There are challenges within the implementation of narrative inquiry as a research model as well. An issue with this proposed methodology of research is that narrative inquiry analysis methods are challenging to come by, especially in education (Schaafsma & Vinz, 2007). Unlike an interview, which would garner answers by responses, a narrative will not give a series of direct answers to the researcher. Even with a complex coding scheme (as detailed below), a narrative gives trust to the participating subject to answer questions that the researcher is seeking. This complicates the issue further when conflicting narratives are presented by subjects with similar backgrounds (Schaafsma & Vinz, 2007).

Finally, previous research that has used a narrative analysis in comprehending educational activities must create a complex coding system. This lacks the simplicity of the surveys that were previously utilized in other research models on sociocultural context. To correctly utilize a narrative is to also create a complex code of comprehending the narrative at hand (Schaafsma & Vinz, 2007). This may negate the overall message of the individual's narrative within the museum, especially if there are conflicts within the narratives of different participants in the research activity.

Potential Solution and Conclusion

The challenge at hand is that this use of visitor narrative and sociocultural context takes place in a museum that demands attention to a visitor's cultural background. However, comprehension of understanding a visitor's sociocultural context within museums assists exhibit designers, learning scientists, and educators in creating a learning environment that attends to all of the needs present within the learning environment. Additionally, a continuation of this research furthers the grasp of the building of successful context within multiple museum genres. Finally, by continuing this research, we are learning the multiple ways in which a visitor can attest to the knowledge that they are building within a museum.

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