Diamond – Dialoguing Museums for a New Cultural Democracy

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Abstract

The role of museums as inclusive institutions is a very debated issue: many attempts have been made to improve the relationship of museums and different publics, in order to turn the museum into places for people of all ages, cultures and backgrounds. Most of the existing experiences seem to be promising in terms of the results they are achieving, but they normally lack (tolto a) structured forms of evaluation.

Diamond is a two-year Grundtvig funded project aimed at realizing museum activities addressed to marginalized groups. It intends to do so by exploiting the enormous potential of museums as tools of empowerment and social inclusion and that of Digital Storytelling (DS) within the cultural and social domain. By training the other partners of the project in the DS methodology and by using it in the implementation and evaluation of the project's activities. Telling stories is indeed an activity embedded in human being's way of making sense of reality, shared by all cultures no matter where they come from and what sort of environment they live in. The use of DS adds to the process of telling stories the potential of self-biography (a very powerful pedagogical tool) and the use of ICT, fostering the decrease of the digital divide among different age groups and different social groups. In the whole, the use of DS is a powerful tool in terms of individual empowerment in order to learn (new knowledge), to learn how to do (new competences) and to learn how to be (self-development, creativity, self expression).

The innovation of the project lies in the idea of bringing together a group of museums and research centers which are committed to provide learning opportunities for adult people (using also ICT) as well as to provide a deep analysis of tools and methodologies addressed to measure the impact of museums activities within society and adult learning field and to develop guidelines of good practice.

With specific reference to evaluation, there are documented experiences within this field, but there is a lack of evaluation of their social and cultural/educational impact through qualitative indicators. Therefore to supply the museum sector with other evaluation impact practices this project aims at identifying and developing qualitative indicators appropriate to measure this impact. DS will be used also as a tool of qualitative evaluation since it will help participants clearly express their feelings about the activities which will be realized within the museums.

1. Introduction

Engaging adults in lifelong learning activities and enhancing the role of adult education is a priority for the European Union. This is why, beside the formal adult educational pathway, museums have a central role in attracting adults in informal educational activities.

Diamond – Dialoguing Museums for a new cultural Democracy is a EU Lifelong Learning programme funded project which aims at involving adult marginalised groups in museum activities using an innovative tool such as Digital Storytelling.

The project started in November 2012 and will end in October 2014.

The partners are: Eccom (Rome), Melting Pro. Laboratorio per la Cultura (Rome), Museo Civico di Zoologia of Rome, "Grigore Antipa" National Museum of Natural History of Bucharest, "Ion Borcea" Natural Sciences Museum Complex of Bacau, Museo de Ciencias Naturales of Valencia.

The aim of the project is to realize museum activities addressed to marginalized groups, exploiting the enormous potential of museums as tools of empowerment and social inclusion and that of DS within the cultural and social domain by training museum professionals in the DS methodology and by using it in the implementation and evaluation of the project's activities: telling stories is indeed an activity embedded in human being's way of making sense of reality, shared by all cultures no matter where they come from and what sort of environment they live in.

The use of DS adds to the process of telling stories the potential of self-biography (a very powerful pedagogical tool) and the use of ICT, fostering the decrease of the digital divide among different age groups and different social groups. In the whole, the use of DS is a powerful tool in terms of individual empowerment in order to learn (new knowledge), to learn how to do (new competences) and to learn how to be (self-development, creativity, self expression).

The project is structured into five phases:
- Research into the personal and social benefits to marginalised people of engaging with scientific museums, aiming to identify and evaluate key theoretical issues regarding museum education and its role in supporting people's development. The research phase is currently going on;
- Training in DS addressed to museum professionals in Spain and Romania, as well as to professionals operating in the social sector and cooperating with the museums in the development of activities addressed to marginalised people. The two training courses will take place in June and July 2013;
- Joint planning of museum education initiatives for adult people of different backgrounds, designed to be transferable and relevant to each of the participants' own professional context (museums and/or social institutions/organisations). Project partners will analyse processes and outcomes of the implementation phase and share them with partners. The Museo Civico di Zoologia has already started its pilot projects and its activities represents the focus of this paper;
- Dissemination through: events, Internet and social networks, video with a selection of stories realised during the project;
- Exploitation through the implementation of a Grundtvig training course addressed to 20 museum professionals and/or social workers from around Europe and the publication of a European Handbook in four languages.

Since the project is currently going on, this paper represents an attempt of presenting a work in progress: the relevant findings and a complete analysis of the project's results will be part of a publication in four languages available at the end of the project itself.

2. The pilot projects realized by the Museo Civico di Zoologia of Rome

The Museo Civico di Zoologia of Rome is the first Diamond's partner which has started its pilot projects activities, due to the fact that its staff had been already trained in the use of DS. Thanks to that, the Museum – under the guide of Elisabetta Falchetti, who is in charge of the Education Department of the Museum – has tested the tool of DS in 5 pilot activities, which started in January 2013.

The Museum working group is composed of five museum professionals and seven external collaborators, all trained in museum education activities and in the use of DS: they plan the activities, prepare the materials, collect documentation, carry out bibliographical research and are engaged in a continuous self-training experience thanks to meetings and focus groups.

2.1 Target groups

The five activities have been addressed to people who can be considered as belonging to socially, physically and culturally marginalized groups:
- Young offenders (IPM Casal del Marmo, Roma);
- Young refugees (Centro diurno Civico Zero-Roma);
- Adult immigrants (1°Centro Territoriale Permanen te – Funzione Strumentale EDA, Istituto Comprensivo Daniele Manin, Roma);
- Elderly people from a suburban area of Rome (Centro Anziani Settecamini);
- Romanì people;
- Hearing impaired people (Istituto Statale Sordi of Rome).

The Museum considers working with these groups an enormous opportunities not only for them – in terms of personal and social development and empowerment – but also for the institution itself in terms of audience development, openings of new intercultural perspectives, recognition of the social value of cultural heritage as a tool for inclusion and social sustainability.

2.1 Methodology

The first important element to be taken into consideration is that all the activities have been focused on the exploitation of the enormous potential of museums as tools of empowerment and social inclusion. The Museum and its collection have always been put at the centre of the experiences and of the cultural exchanges: the collection has been used to share previous knowledge and to build new meanings and interpretations, based on many different point of views and not only on the scientific one.

The strategy used to carry out the pilot activities is based on three steps:

- Museum professionals go to the centers/places carrying with them some particularly meaningful specimens of the Museum collection, in order to start a dialogue, stimulate curiosity and sharing the concept of a museum open to everybody. Very often people are afraid of not being accepted, because they feel culturally excluded: the strategy of the invitation to participate has been proved extremely successful in order to tackle this feeling of inadequacy;
- The second step is based on a visit to the Museum: the itinerary of the visit within the Museum can be freely chosen by participants and museum professionals are with them to answer questions and exchange comments. After that, workshop activities take place, in order to analyze in depth the museum environment or other themes suggested by participants;
- The last step is the planning of "restitution" activities, among which there is the Storytelling. This phase is very important because it involves directly the participants, stimulating their creativity, encouraging the exchange of thoughts and ideas and the acquisition of self-esteem.

DS in Diamond is used as tool of self-expression and evaluation at the same time.
So far, the preliminary phase of the story circles and collection of photographic documentation have been realized with the young offenders, the refugees and the group of elderly people. Since the first meeting, it has been presented the chance of realizing digital stories in order to tell personal experiences which happened within the museum and/or emotions, knowledge, interests related to it. The two main themes have been "I tell myself to the Museum" and "I tell the Museum": on this basis, discussions and gathering of information have taken place. The idea has been accepted by all groups, although the elderly people feared not to be able to use the new technologies and had to be reassured that they would have been helped by the museum professionals in mastering the digital tools.
The Storytelling phase has been so far extremely involving and interesting: the narrative form seems to be ideal to share experiences also for people of diverse age, language and culture.
For the time being, the written texts have been produced and the images collected, in order to start the digitalization of the stories.

2.3 Evaluation

The Museo Civico di Zoologia is identifying qualitative evaluation tools, which are more suitable than quantitative ones to analyze the impact of these activities from a cognitive and emotional point of view.
The categories chosen for the evaluation have been developed considering that:

- the impact of the Museum is very personal and each individual perceives it as a unique experience;
- the objectives of the activities are not necessarily cognitive ones or only focused on the acquisition of knowledge and/or competences, since they represent only one aspect within the individual's training process;
- cultural activities can have an impact on many aspects of personality, such as creativity, interest, participation, values, motivation, behavior, etc. as well as on the different kinds of multiple intelligences;
- the value of these experiences is not only in the outputs/outcomes but also in the process itself;
- the success of a educational/cultural process represents the creation of something new and extremely meaningful from a personal point of view.

Data on these aspects are collected trough questionnaires, analysis of products, focus groups, etc.: it is important to let emerge how participants live the experience, how and why their cognitive structures, their emotions and their competences change. Finally, the working group observes and documents constantly their behavior, in a sort of ethnographic analysis.
The elaboration procedures used by the working group are based on the phenomenographic approach, which is a form of evaluation based on the assumption that and educational activity aims at

improving people abilities in thinking, finding solutions and new approaches and not only in having good performances. The focus is not only on the results but on the process itself (how people learn and live the experience).

The first evaluation on the activities carried out by the Museum shows a good success from the point of view of the disciplinary knowledge, a great success in the domain of interest, participation and personal commitment, also by young people in a clear situation of cultural disadvantage.

Also from the point of view of social relationships the indications are extremely positive: participants demonstrate patience, commitment, attention and the desire to work together, to share, to co-operate.

3. Conclusion

The role of museums as inclusive institutions is a very debated issue: many attempts have been made to improve the relationship of museums and different publics, in order to turn the museum into places for people of all ages, cultures and backgrounds. Most of the existing experiences seem to be promising in terms of the results they are achieving, but they normally lack a structured forms of evaluation.

The innovation of the project lies in the idea of bringing together a group of museums and research centres which are committed to providing learning opportunities for adult people (using also ICT) as well as to provide a deep analysis of tools and methodologies addressed to measure the impact of museums activities within society and adult learning field and to develop guidelines of good practice.

All of these partners are already working with people from different backgrounds in co-operation with different kinds of social, educational and local institutions. The project will also give them the possibility to train their professionals in an innovative communication method such as DS and to develop some new and innovative educational activity, either individually or jointly, addressed to disadvantaged adult groups.

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