ESSENCE OF AN ARTIFACT: A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE OF ARTIFACT INTERPRETATION

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Abstract

In their educational role, museums offer learners of all ages an opportunity to view and interact with artifacts which complement an aspect of curriculum. It is the role of museum educators to create programs, including field study programs, which provide learners with enriching experiences. Such programs are important community educational resources. Through museum programs, artifacts are used to explain and interpret history and culture. Drawing from the works of critical theorists, this paper assumes a critical perspective of artifact interpretation and museum program planning. Finally, a hermeneutic approach is offered as an alternative method to reading the artifact, and a template is suggested for museum program development which best enframes the hermeneutic approach to artifact interpretation. The paper is directed towards museum educators involved in the training of adult museum volunteers who deliver programs in cooperation with professionals working in formal education systems.

Résumé

Les musées peuvent enrichir les programmes éducatifs existants en offrant aux apprenants la possibilité de dialoguer avec les artefacts historiques. C'est le rôle des musées de créer des activités d'enrichissement telles que des visites dirigées. Dans le cadre des programmes muséaux, les artefacts servent d'outils pour interpréter l'histoire et la culture. Cet article présente un point de vue critique face à l'interprétation muséologique et la création de programmes éducatifs. On y propose approche herméneutique pour l'analyse des objets, et on élabore un cadre pour la planification de programmes reflétant cette approche. Cet article interpelle les éducateurs en milieu muséal dont les responsabilités comprennent la formation de bénévoles agissant de cioncert avec les institutions d'enseignement.

Black, soft, and shiny are three adjectives to describe a top hat, one of the many objects owned by former Prime Minister John Diefenbaker. The hat is one of several thousand personal items collected and preserved in the museum bearing his name. Once used as a fashionable adornment, the function of the hat has changed to an artifact used to explain a facet of Canadian political culture. It might be placed in a display case with other articles of clothing, with a label describing their use. Or, it could be assigned to active interpretive duty in community education programming.

At this point, the hat becomes a vital link between the museum and other educational institutions. The museum educator is primarily responsible for deciding how and when the hat is used to explain and interpret history and culture to learners of all ages. Using the top hat as a reference point, this paper, offered as a reflective piece for museum educators, will address the issues of artifacts, curriculum, and program planning.

The role of the museum in educating the public about past events and people is evident in programming designed to attract school and community groups. Most often, these programs enrich a concept of the school curriculum or adult education program through the use of demonstrations, role play, activities with artifacts, crafts, and lectures. Our top hat, for example, might be used as a visual aid to relay information about the life and times of a prominent citizen. However, before any decisions are made about the selection and use of artifacts in programming, I, as a museum educator, can don the hat of critical theorist and be challenged by the same types of questions being posed to my colleagues in other educational institutions.

Critical theorists actively engage in reflection, for it is through this practice that "the critical analytic process uncovers and makes explicit the tacit and hidden assumptions and intentions held" (Aoki, 1980, p. 16). Coupled with reflection is an intention to change, to transform and improve, the current situation. As a reflective museum educator guided by the writings of critical theorists, I can examine my current practices of program development in search of hidden assumptions, and change those practices for the benefit of my museum's learners.

Issues of power and knowledge addressed by Freire (1970), Kliebard (1975), Apple (1975, 1993), Anyon (1981), and Giroux (1985) can serve to challenge the ways in which I approach museum program development. The same questions asked about the implementation of curricula in formal instructional settings apply to museum programs. Artifacts replace texts as teaching tools, but can be similarly scrutinized.

The old aphorism "Which came first, the chicken or the egg?" can be modified in museum terms to state "Which came first, the artifact or the program?" My preference in program development has been to first select a topic as a foundation, then to choose artifacts from the collection which best describe or represent the topic. Some museum educators reverse that order by first choosing the artifacts, then finding a match with an instructional goal or objective (Museums Association of Saskatchewan, 1995). Before any action is taken in program development, and particularly before engaging the curriculum, museum educators are challenged to seek out the "hidden curriculum" (Apple, 1975). This refers to the unspoken agenda of what is chosen to be represented in the curriculum, by whom, and how that will be fulfilled in the institution. To bring the hidden curriculum into the open, it can be asked: Whose interests are served by the programs being created? and, What are the cultural, political and economic factors which influence curriculum, or program, decisions? In most cases, as a museum educator I must consider the interests of my institution and its board members, teachers, adult instructors, other museum personnel such as curators, school boards, the general public, funding agencies, and

possibly learners. In practical terms, whose interests are served by my program about a prime minister from Saskatchewan? Does this program perpetuate the status quo? Essentially, these questions address the issue of power relationships, which can affect curriculum, or program, construction and implementation. Power can "be used to dominate, to impose ideas and practices on people in undemocratic ways" (Apple, 1993, p. 5). More appropriately, who holds power in museum program development, and what ideas and practices are being communicated to students through artifacts such as the top hat? How do the interests of funding agencies and boards influence program development at the Diefenbaker Canada Centre?

Having decided upon the instructional topic, the next step in program development is the creation of objectives to be achieved by the learners. Objectives act as signposts along a route that guides the museum educator, and students, to the intended outcomes of the program. Objectives are measurable, and an evaluation at the end of the program enables the educator to determine to what extent the learners have benefited from the journey. Kliebard (1975), however, cautions about the use of behavioral objectives to manipulate learners into doing what educators wish them to do. Education built around objectives is at risk of becoming controlled, dehumanized and factory-oriented, with a consequent loss of learners' intellectual curiosity. Again I am challenged to query whose interests are being served by behavioral objectives. Specifically, what intellectual activities are fostered by my program objectives? Does the journey encourage intellectual detours?

Whether consciously or not, program planning involves a decision-making process about what will be taught. What learners need to know is decided by the educator, and this decision can be influenced by power relationships, as well as the politics of gender, class, race, or religious groups (Apple, 1993, p. 46). The potency of social class in curriculum interpretation is addressed by Anyon (1980), who determined that teachers displayed different expectations of and attitudes toward students depending on their (the students') perceived social class. Upon closer inspection, perhaps my program gives the impression that only those of a particular class, race, and gender can become Prime Minister. A more inclusive approach would be to augment the top hat with the hat of newspaper carrier similar to the one worn by John Diefenbaker as a young lad in Saskatoon. By comparing and contrasting the two hats, a different message is relayed about social class.

A Freireian critique of the education system can yield insightful interpretations when scrutinizing museum program development. Freire (1970) compares education to banking, with the teacher as the depositor and the learners as the depositories. Knowledge, rather than money, is the commodity (p. 58). The teacher controls the commodity. Museums as educational institutions are at similar risk to implementing banking education. What Freire advocates as a replacement to the banking concept of education is a problem-posing approach, in which the instructor and learners engage in dialogue, resulting in a mutual process of growth. This alternative offers potential for museums, as artifacts hold great potential to initiate dialogues.

This paper has critically pondered the development of curriculum-based programs in museums. I have examined museum educators' decisions to determine whose

interests are being served by programs (Apple, 1975) and objectives (Kliebard, 1975), how ideas about social class, gender and race are communicated (Anyon, 1980, Apple, 1993), and how knowledge is controlled (Freire, 1970). Now, my focus shifts to the role of the educator. This is not a study of personality types, rather, it is a query about the educator's role in taking an "active responsibility for raising serious questions about what they teach, how they are to teach, and what the larger goals are for which they are striving" (Giroux, 1985, p. 378). Embracing critical theory changes the role of the educator from that of passive curriculum technician to that of activist or agent of change. The result is the education of learners as critical and reflective thinkers who participate actively in their own learning experiences. They become sensitized to justice issues (social, political, economic) and in turn work to create a more just and equitable world. For example, in creating a museum program about a prime minister, the focus might be to explore racial, gender and class struggles by examining the topics of native citizenship and suffrage, immigration and the Empire, gender equity and employment, and prairie populism.

One final comparison which can be drawn between formal instructional settings and museums is the use of materials to support instruction. In museums, artifacts are textbooks. What facts are being conveyed to students through artifacts? Are demonstrations and role plays the "glossy photographs" which enhance the presentation of facts? Once again I can question the political, economic and cultural reasons which lie behind my particular choice and interpretation of artifacts, and the role these issues play in influencing what knowledge is presented through the objects. Evidence of this can be seen in the marginalization of artifacts from specific gender or cultural groups, even though they offer a different perspective to enrich our view of the world.

Artifact reading from a new perspective

Having cast a critical eye on program development, the role of the educator, and the use of artifacts, I now explore an alternative approach to artifact interpretation, the core of museum programming.

In many objective-centered approaches to museum programming, the information garnered from the artifact is primarily sensory. Students gather information, facts, about the visual and tactile attributes of the object. Information about the top hat, for example, might include black, shiny, soft, as well as functional attributes which describe who used it, when, and why. Yet there is very little understanding of the essence of the top hat. Insights from selected hermeneutic researchers give direction to the means of uncovering the intrinsic nature of the top hat.

Palmer (1969) defined hermeneutics as the "study of understanding, especially the task of understanding texts" (p. 8). Historically, hermeneutics has been employed in the interpretation of biblical and classical texts. Interpreting texts in this manner is rarely the job of museum educators; rather, our primary concern is the marriage of curriculum and program concepts and artifacts. However, the same principles of hermeneutics can be applied to curriculum concepts and artifacts as theologians apply to biblical texts.

Palmer further explained that through hermeneutics, "something foreign, strange, separate in time, space, or experience is made familiar, present, comprehensible; something requiring representation, explanation, or translation is somehow 'brought to understanding'- is 'interpreted'" (p. 14). In an unpublished master's thesis, Dorrington claimed:

> Gadamer (1975), Ricoeur (1974), and Heidegger (1971) regarded language as the focal point of hermeneutics. Man [*sic*] can not step outside of language and examine it externally, it can only be examined from an internal perspective. Every human experience is perceived to be linguistically [*sic*] related. (1986, p. 48)

Language is fundamentally represented as text. Through text, we are able to understand the lives of people who lived in other times and in other places. The relevance of text pedagogically was outlined in a discourse by Oh (1986) who claimed that we live in a world of text, be it written or taken in a metaphoric sense (p. 1).

> Through our interpretation of text, we understand the world and communicate its meaning to one another. In this way, it can be said that we live in and experience the world of the text, and thus the text and the act of text interpretation penetrate our lives prior to any theoretical explanation about them. Especially in education, text and text interpretation take a central place, because in its fundamental sense the pedagogical situation consists of communication of meanings based on diverse interpretations. (p. 1)

Oh's claim has great implications for museum programming. Substituting the word "artifact" for "text" sheds new light on the role an artifact can play in deepening our understanding of it. Substituting the words "top hat" for "text" invites us, or gives us permission, to ponder the top hat, to interpret it, to experience it, and to communicate its meaning to others. Like one of the great classic texts, the top hat is an expression of lived experience.

In most museum programs, three major components are evident: the presentation of facts, goals and objectives which drive the program, and the submission of pre-knowledge. Alternatively, the focus on presenting facts about an artifact can be replaced by facilitating an understanding of the artifact. Designing objectives to be attained during the program can be replaced by creating experiences of the artifact in ways that are meaningful to students, or which relate to their own situations. While little time and attention are allotted to students' related experiences or pre-knowledge in current museum programs, a hermeneutic approach would incorporate those experiences and pre-understandings into the program itself.

For the purpose of demonstrating this approach to museum program development, we can again enlist the aid of the top hat. What is the essence of the top hat? What can the top hat tell us about the essence of being human? Oh (1986) defined six principles for text interpretation, which can be adopted and used by museum educators to yield greater understanding about the essence of the an artifact. They are: pre-knowledge, process, experience, connectedness to life, communication, and meaning-in-context.

As with texts, our interpretation of artifacts is influenced by our personal experiences. Apple (1993) addresses this in a somewhat different fashion: "Students bring their own classed, raced, religious, and gendered biographies with them as well" (p. 61). Rather than dismissing personal experience, these pre-understandings should be recognized and encouraged (Oh, 1986, p. 25), for without our personal experiences, "we can neither write nor understand a text at all" (op. cit., p. 26). It is through interpreting or interacting with a text that our pre-knowledge transforms into new understandings. The same is true for an artifact. Each learner participating in a program investigating the essence of a top hat conceivably brings knowledge, attitudes, and assumptions to the experience. This pre-knowledge could take the form of an awareness of the function of head-gear, or the trendiness of apparel, as evident in the current fad of wearing baseball caps backwards. An existing knowledge base is the foundation onto which new knowledge is added. Or, pre-knowledge is transformed into new understanding as a result of reading the artifact. It is conceivable that gender, age, and social class are lenses through which children read artifacts. For example, a top hat is a form of head-gear worn in past times by males; thus it is a gendered, aged, artifact. Children's experiences with top hats today might come from literature, or post-war musical films.

Process refers to the production of the artifact. The top hat provides an opportunity for learners to study millinery occupations, or perhaps to design and construct a hat of their own. Their interactive participation in recreating the process of artifact construction precipitates an understanding of a facet of the artifact.

Providing more opportunities for learners to make connections between an artifact and their own lives will contribute to deeper understandings. Helping them to compare and contrast, or to draw parallels between the hats they wear for various occasions with the formal use of the top hat is more meaningful than simply hearing a lecture about it. Adding their own experiences, either as head-gear experts or as newly-apprenticed milliners, enables the students to perceive the top hat differently. Some may make connections between our top hat and those worn by favorite characters in children's literature, particularly the Mad Hatter in *Alice in Wonderland* (Carroll,1890), or maybe *The Cat in the Hat* (Seuss, 1957). Learners can also be guided to recognize how hats are elements of socially constructed roles, and the expectation of a prime minister in being positioned within those roles.

Artifacts as texts can be scrutinized, interpreted, and their meanings communicated to others. Communication becomes more than just listing interpretive views about the top hat; each learner's experience will be different. People give personal meanings to situations and experiences, and interpret the same event differently (Aoki, 1980, p. 14). Communicating requires learners to clarify their own experiences, and to search for and share the common elements of their experiences with those of others.

Reading only a paragraph from a novel, or a word from a sentence, robs the reader of the ability to interpret or make meaning of any text in its entirety. The paragraph or work must be placed in a context before full meaning is made. Similarly, artifacts need to be placed in their variety of contexts. In order to

understand the range of meanings of the top hat, it needs to be placed in the contexts of social or political class.

The six principles, pre-knowledge, process, experience, connectedness to life, communication, and meaning-in-context (Oh, 1986), can be used in museum programming as guidelines when designing programs which probe the essence of an artifact. The principles are interdisciplinary in nature, overlapping rather than compartmentalizing. It is a difficult task to think in terms of closing your textbook on process because now it's time to open your textbook on experience.

Conclusion

Some museum staff who develop education programs arrive at their job with little or no formal museum training. Some attend brief workshops sponsored by provincial museum associations which give directions about program planning and development. Increasingly, and fortunately, universities are recognizing the need for formal training and are offering courses in resource management and museum studies. Some staff, like myself, come to museum programming with education backgrounds, and thus modify what we have learned in teacher education and adult education programs to fit the museum environment. Personally, and I suspect I am not alone, my training focused on a very transmissional (technical-rational) approach to the exclusion of critical theorist, interpretivist, and post-modern perspectives. This paper is the result of a self-reflection of program development. It is presented as a reflective exercise for consideration by museum educators who create and conduct activities for museum visitors of all ages. My journey through the reflective exercise included an examination of my current programming practices guided by the tenets espoused by critical theorists. This led to a search for an alternate method of program development.

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