

An iPod Experiment

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This paper is about individual choice and control of learning in museums, and, more specifically, about an experiment carried on in my museum in the use of iPods as a learning tool. In 2008 we at The Nickle Arts Museum, at the University of Calgary, Canada, decided to videotape museum tours and presentations and drop these tapes to iPods which visitors could pick up at the front desk. We did this because we were aware that not all visitors could attend at a specific time to hear the artist or curator give a tour of his exhibition, or present a talk on one particular aspect of a show. We also recognized that the iPod was a good tool because not only did it provide considerably more information than could be incorporated into a label or a descriptive panel, for example, but also because it allowed a visitor to proceed through an exhibition at her own pace, retracing steps and rewinding the file as desired. Furthermore this material was presented both visually and aurally in a movable fashion: the information traveled with the visitor rather than being restricted to one place, as is a TV monitor. While video material is increasingly available on a computer, via YouTube, we specifically wanted visitors to have the flexibility of learning with the iPod tool in the physical exhibition space, in front of the artifacts.

This paper will review some of the theory behind this decision, give a bit of an overview of the experiment, and then examine in some more detail what the next steps might be, considering mainly the desired outcomes, rather than concentrating on the current or perceived limitations of hardware and software. I have no pretense to being a techie, so I will not go in that direction. Rather what I am interested in is how people learn and want to learn in museums and how, as a museologist, I can promote and encourage such learning through mobile technology.

An examination of museums over the past two decades would suggest that there are two primary thrusts currently in vogue. The first, the more traditional, is

the collection-based approach. Museums that favour this direction feature exhibitions of their collection, usually as a permanent exhibition, built on a formal discipline-based organization, with minimal labels and interpretative materials, to invite appreciation of the object for its scientific, technical, social or aesthetic value. Many visitors, familiar with this style of presentation, are comfortable with it. The second thrust, based on new museology, is visitor-centred rather than object-centred, demanding active visitor input rather than passive accepted authority.¹ Here a story, perhaps with a social message, is often central. The collection might play a role in building this story or theme, but might not. Context, questions and social transformation are usually vital. Since visitor engagement is prominent, visitors who expect a passive visit to a supposedly neutral exhibition find they are being asked to act and react in whole new ways.

The collection-based museums, perforce, are the ones that can boast of incredible, unique holdings. But even they, like the venerable old lady of US museums, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, are now often drifting toward a more nuanced and dialogic approach, such that the Met's sublime Temple of Dendur is complimented by an extensive wall of multidisciplinary explanations and context setting. A similar shift is evident at the de Young Museum in San Francisco. At the Louvre a fascinating multi-year study called Museum Lab is underway in conjunction with Tokyo Dai Nippon Printing.² Here technological interpretative methods are being tested to determine visitor efficacy and interest. What is evident is that there is a convergence of museum types such that museums aspire to be places of discovery and experiment, where western knowledge is de-privileged and issues are discussed and debated from a multidisciplinary point of view. Knowledge itself is changing, becoming more fluid and dynamic, as Zygmunt (Ziggy) Bauman notes, with knowledges rather than one authorized truth being recognized and

¹ Peter Vergo, *The New Museology*, London: Reaktion Books, 1989; Andrea Hauenschild, *Claims and reality of new museology: case studies in Canada, the United States and Mexico*, Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1998.

² Louvre – DNP Museum Lab, www.museumlab.jp/english, accessed 22 February, 2010.

promoted. Recently Bauman has been writing about “liquid modernity,” his term for the present condition of the world as contrasted with the earlier “solid modernity.”³ This passage to a “liquid” state requires individuals to be flexible and adaptable, to be constantly willing and able to change tactics at short notice. In addition theories, such as those of the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze (1929-1995), emphasize the performative nature of learning in the space between the object or text, on the one hand, and the visitor or learner, on the other hand.⁴ The dialogical approach, encouraging the validity of many positions, results in the richness of multiple interpretations and meanings.

The culturally defined museum has changed considerably over time, and the rate and nature of such change has varied from country to country. As Judith Spielbauer, well ahead of her time, perceptively notes, the assignment of meaning, value and significance to the past is what makes museums consequential and involved in the action of the present.⁵ The past, however, is not the only marker of identity. For example, religion and language are of considerable importance. Museums, as preservers of the past, along with archives and libraries, then, have perceived value in forming, supporting and promoting identity only to the extent that the past is considered a component and a repository of worthy current facts, influences, objects and events. In general terms, museums have changed, like all social institutions, in both form and function. Rather than being a repository, today they are educational and social institutions. Rather than showing isolated objects, today many concentrate on integrating objects and their social and natural contexts into a visitor’s experiences. Certainly today, museums seek many visitors and not the privileged few and aim to be not passive but rather active in their specific socio-

³ Baumann, Zygmunt. 2006. *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty*. Cambridge: Polity.

⁴ See, for example, *A Thousand Plateaus: capitalism and schizophrenia*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987.

⁵ Spielbauer, Judith, “Museums and Museology: A Means to Active Integrative Preservation / Musées et muséologie: outils de préservation active et intégrante.” In “Museology and Museums / Muséologie et Musées.” *ICOFOM Study Series 12* (1987). pp. 273-274.

cultural climates. Similarly, the visitor has gone from passively accepting revealed truths to actively questioning and participating in an ongoing quest.⁶

This active quest is clearly noted in the seminal book, *Learning from Museums: Visitor Experiences and the Making of Meaning*, 2000, by John Falk and Lynn Dierking.⁷ Here the authors isolate eight key factors, or suites of factors, which they think are fundamental to museum learning experiences.⁸ The third such factor, and the one germane to us, is personal Choice and Control. Individually and collectively, the eight factors significantly contribute to a visitor having a quality museum experience. When one of the eight is absent, meaning-making is more difficult. Falk and Dierking wrote that “Learning is at its peak when individuals can exercise choice over what and when they learn and feel that they control their own learning.”⁹

Examining learning through choice and control, Falk and Dierking recognize that all museums offer visitors some degree of opportunity to choose where they want to go, what they want to see and do, what they want to learn. Controlling learning, too, can take many forms, both passive and active. Interactive possibilities allow for more autonomy, but even traditional exhibitions permit a certain degree of freedom. Children’s museums were singled out as being especially open to allowing for visitors, children, to choose what they want to do, when and how. As the authors noted “In the ‘real’ world, other people are always telling them (the children) what to do and when to do it. In the children’s-museum world, they are in charge.”¹⁰ And, the authors conclude, “All of us in the museum world have much to learn from

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 272. Georg E. Hein, *Learning in the Museum*, London: Routledge, 1998.

⁷ Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press

⁸ These 8 factors are, under the category Personal Context, motivation and control, prior knowledge, interests and beliefs, choice and control. Under the category Sociocultural Context, within-group sociocultural mediation, and facilitated mediation by other. And under the category Physical Context, advance organizers and orientation, design, and reinforcing events and experiences outside the museum.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 138.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 186.

children's museums, perhaps most notably a willingness to let the learners have more autonomy and control over their own learning, to let them be in charge."¹¹

This idea of controlling your own learning is also of vital importance to Lynne Conner, who is greatly interested in how meaning is made in a museum. Coming from a performing arts background, Conner examines the interplay between three discrete components of a performance or art museum experience: the artist, the art object and the audience.¹² She concludes that the *arts experience*, her words, are centred on an active transformation, "to undergo." "To experience something means that the receiver has taken a journey. It means that there has been a shift in perception that has allowed the receiver to become the perceiver, to move from passive to active."¹³ Conner calls visitors "co-authors" of their own experiences.

How should this be done? How should museums actively promote, not just permit, co-authoring, or audience-centred programs? Conner rejects "telling" visitors what the work of art "means." She contends that audience enrichment should not be about solving controversies or fixing misunderstandings, should not be about what the artist or the institution wants, and should not be about a political agenda. Rather what the audience really wants, she suggests,

is the opportunity to co-author the arts experience.... They want the opportunity to participate – in an intelligent and responsible way – in *telling its meaning*." (Emphasis in Conner) They want to have a real forum (or several forums) for the interplay of ideas, experience, data, and feeling that makes up the arts experience.¹⁴

And this is what I think the iPod technology can lead us toward. This co-authoring of the museum experience is what I would like to achieve with hand-held technology.

At The Nickle Arts Museum producing content for the iPod and loading it was relatively easy. We concentrated on video taping the lectures and tours that we normally schedule in association with our exhibitions. At times these were rather

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

¹² Lynne Conner, "Who gets to Tell the Meaning?", *Grantmakers in the Arts Reader*, Vol. 15, no. 1, Winter 2004, pp. 11 – 14.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

long - anything over 50 minutes we considered too long – so we would edit them down to a maximum of 50 minutes. In the edit we also added a title, speaker and date on each program. Then these tapes were loaded onto three iPods, which were available at the front desk for anyone who wanted to use them. To borrow an iPod, the patron had to deposit with us an important piece of identification, such as a driver's license or student card. The staff members at the front desk were also ready to give the visitor instructions on how to use the equipment, if necessary.

Our program was most successful. Visitors loved being able to tour an exhibition, accessing the comments of a curator or artist and actually standing before the artifact being discussed. Visitors also like the flexibility of the technology, that they could turn it off and then on again at will, that they could backtrack as wanted. Here, of course, visitors had much more choice than a video on a TV screen installed in one spot provides. Some of the older visitors were a little uncertain as to how to use the equipment, but most found it pretty easy. All in all, we were very pleased with the results, but recognize that this is simply one step in the co-authoring process.¹⁵

What we would like to do next is to make the program much more visitor oriented, much more flexible and active, to allow the visitor even more choice and control. We want to find technology which will allow visitors to search beyond what we are currently presenting, so that, if a speaker mentions another artist, or a work that is not represented in the exhibition, the visitor can search the web and find what he or she wants. We hope to develop a much richer, more nuanced and more individualized process.

The principles we have in mind, the goals that we want to achieve in terms mainly of content are as follows:

- Design experiences that allow people to personalize the information presented

¹⁵ Feedback was obtained by asking each person a few questions when he or she was returning the iPod. These questions included whether they found the technology easy to use, whether they liked the content, what they thought about the length of the program, and what else they would like.

- Recognize different learning styles and offer different types of learners clear choices
- Provide a variety of entry and exit points
- Layer the complexity of the experiences so learners can self-select the depth and complexity of information they want
- Build emotion into the learning experience – humour, uncertain ending, human interactions
- Make the experience enjoyable and fun
- Work to ensure that what is to be learned clearly relates to the needs and interests of the visitor
- Scale the challenges and rewards to the self-defined abilities of the visitor, recognizing that quality learning is open-ended
- Put learners squarely in control of their own learning¹⁶
- Understand that talking is an important tool in learning and provide for group dynamics, not just individual systems
- Recognize that audience enrichment is not audience development, that learning is different from a marketing strategy of increasing the number of visitors
- Recognize that enrichment is a value
- Effective audience enrichment will dismantle the authority of the museum and replace it with a civic dialogue¹⁷

So what we want in terms of technology is:

- Access to audio
- To text
- To images
- To video
- Ability to switch from one to the other

¹⁶ Falk and Dierking, pp. 188-189.

¹⁷ Conner, pp. 13-14.

- Ability to switch from content on mobile device to creating content

Existing technology is just about sophisticated enough to allow for all these operations. Numerous museological and tourist organization, including the Tate Modern, the Afrika Museum in the Netherlands, the Museo Picasso and MoMA, are working in this direction, for this is a hot topic.¹⁸ There are lots of options to choose from and I chose one to examine in more detail here. An interesting example was presented at this year's conference, *Museums and the Web 2010: the International conference for culture and heritage-on-line*, by Jeff Doyle and Maureen Ward Doyle, of Open Museum, USA. Here they described a case study of their mobile service at the Hood Museum of Art at Dartmouth College.¹⁹

What Doyle and Doyle tested was a sharable bundle of content designed, like The Nickle Arts Museum project, to be specifically to be used inside the museum, a dedicated mobile tour. They first tested a mobile version of their software Open Museum. What participants liked about this web-based tour was the ability to listen, as well as see and read information. Most also liked the ability to search for more information at will. The kind of information they wanted to access was related works of art, other pieces by the same artist, discussions by specialists and gossip. But the testers found the technology too complicated to use.²⁰

So Doyle and Doyle created another piece of software, a mobile tour service they called Mobeum. Mobeum tours are playlists containing both objects and customized tour-only panels,²¹ but without the visitor's ability to pass on their own impressions and interests. Mobeum is obviously much deeper than the Nickle's iPod system, for Mobeum, when loaded with rich content, provides visitors with lots of choice, lots of layers of information, but does not yet fully let the visitor be co-author

¹⁸ For a recent list of some of the case studies see <http://search.creativecommons.org/?q=Mobeum&sourceid=Mozilla-search>.

¹⁹ "Mixing Social Glue with Brick and Mortar: Experiments Using the Mobile Web to Connect People, Objects and Museums," <http://www.archimuse.com/me2910> accessed 17 June, 2010.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

or co-curator by sending tweets or posting comments. Doyle and Doyle recognize this missing step, and are planning to incorporate it in their next phase.

I believe that visitors want to participate more actively in their museum experience and that mobile technology offers one very promising possibility for museums to encourage that. The iPod experiment at The Nickle Arts Museum is just a beginning. Now we are working toward a more sophisticated system that will allow visitors the choice and control they want.