

## SHORT REPORT

# '...Threat and Opportunity to Be Found in the Disintegrating World.' (O'Hara 2003, 71) – The Potential for Transformative Museum Experiences in the Post-Covid Era

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This short article aims to draw from Transformational Education Theory to highlight an opportunity for museums to contribute actively to individual and societal change through the delivery of transformational experiences. This paper advocates for intentional practice, inspired by Theory, with a clear purpose aimed at changing mind-sets and suggests a mechanism for creating these experiences.

This sense of purpose has the potential to establish a significant role for museums as part of the societal response to the pandemic.

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'We are living in times of unprecedented change [...] permanently affecting the way we live, the environment, who we are as human beings, and, above all in these times [...] how we must relate to each other in our relationships and communities across the globe' (O'Hara 2003, 66).

Written in 2003, marking the first edition of *The Journal of Transformative Education*, O'Hara's statement is as true today as it was then. Perhaps it is human nature to feel that we are permanently on a rollercoaster of change. Popular media suggests that this carries with it large doses of both fear of change and inspiration to initiate it (Kickbusch et al 2020). Whether this is the case or not, the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic has been profound and the museum sector has not been exempted. This short article aims to draw from Transformational Education Theory (Mezirow 2000) to highlight an opportunity to be found in the midst of the current crisis for the museum sector: a chance to embrace a role as an enabler of individual and societal change.

Despite challenges caused in part by the crisis (Stokes 2020), furloughed and housebound staff – utilizing reduced budgets and limited facilities – have managed to innovate, creating new output. These have kept museums connected to audiences and, in particular, have exploited digital technologies and their strengths (Agostino, Arnaboldi & Lampis 2020). In an attempt to respond to pandemic control measures, the approach towards museum adaptations could be described as

'medical': physical spacing, hand sanitization, removal of tactile exhibits (which may unintentionally reduce access for groups such as partially sighted people), etc. These retrofitted adaptations to existing experiences may give confidence to returning audiences, however, are they simply tinkering on the edges of an outdated, self-serving model?

'I submit that most museums have largely ignored, on both moral and practical grounds, a broader commitment to the world in which we live' (Janes 2009, 30).

Recent years have seen many museums face scrutiny and criticism that has touched upon diverse issues such as funding sources (e.g. sponsorship from the petrochemicals industry); colonial legacies continuing to influence curatorial practice; and staff bodies unrepresentative of communities served (Janes and Sandell 2019). Now is the time for a radical response to these failings, for the sector to push harder to confirm the societal value of progressive museums, as McWhinney and Markos write: 'crisis unfreezes the person to accept the loss and begin a search that takes one across the threshold into a space where one can risk deep exploration' (2003, 21).

How then can the sector move beyond lip service (Culture& 2020) to this goal of transformative change? Transformational Education suggests a route, but it will only be successful if the sector can unite to acknowledge their role as agents of positive change. Recent controversy over the International Council of Museums (ICOM) definition of the museum (Noce 2019) highlights that not all are ready (or able) to do so. The new definition split the sector over the 'ideological' purpose of museums as agents of societal change.

Transformational Education concerns itself with the expansion of mind-sets, encouraging a reconsideration of one's worldview. Through an inherently political process it fosters societal change by supporting critical thought. Theory built upon the foundations laid by pioneers such as Friere (1972) and Mezirow (2000) form the backbone of thought in the field, which initially guided adult educators but is currently being tested and applied in new contexts. There are now 18 volumes of *The Journal of Transformative Education*.

Likewise, the conceptualization of the Transformational Museum is not new (Nielsen 2014) but is perhaps newly relevant. Becoming a Transformative Museum requires a holistic approach to imbuing the organization, its staff and output with a coherent aim of delivering transformational experiences. These experiences are those that enable a reconsideration of the 'assumptions by which self and society are guided and given support' (McWhinney and Markos 2003, 30).

In support of the delivery of these transformational experiences, I suggest a three-step process:

1. Ensure that the organization maintains a clear position on the socially relevant issues they wish (or are required) to address.

'[...] a twenty-first century system for lifelong public science [and cultural] learning must have the capacity to support the ever-changing nature of science [and culture] ... to empower citizens attempting to address every type of science challenge, need or context' (Falk undated).

Embedding the desire to transform the world through the organization's mission is the only way to ensure that all museum operations and structures support this goal. With a unified vision, museums can bring about real impact. For example, they 'can enhance sustainability [...] by working with and empowering communities to bring about change' (ICOM 2018).

A well-recognized pre-Covid-19 example of a museum with a clearly stated transformational ambition is the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington. Societal impact is at the heart of this institution. As its corporate documentation states: 'Te Papa helps coalesce a strong shift forward in recognising the role and positive influence of Māori culture in New Zealand' (Te Papa 2016, 17). Despite healthy debate about the effectiveness of their activities, there is clear evidence that their public and other outputs are, at least in part, guided by this ambition (Goldsmith 2003).

This clarity of focus and strength of identity will aid institutions, encouraging them to embrace the new requirements of our mid-, and hopefully, post-Covid societies. Whilst museums are often slow moving,

the pandemic has shown that those institutions that have developed tools to meet their clear purpose can act quickly. A strong example is the Museum of London's (2020) quick move to document the impact of the crisis on Londoners through their established program of contemporary collecting.

2. Utilize museum assets to create learning experiences that: 'help learners become aware and critical of their own and others' assumptions. Learners need practice in recognizing frames of reference and using their imaginations to redefine problems from a different perspective.' (Mezirow 1997, 10)

Objects, digital and live programming, artworks and immersive experiences all have the potential to unlock new perspectives (Hooper-Greenhill 2013) which can create the required dialogue for transformation (Mezirow 2000). The task for museums will be to craft experiences that lead to change. Mezirow's theory indicates that transformative experiences scaffold learners through a four-part journey which should also underpin a transformative museum experience.

In line with a constructivist approach (Hein 1995), the transformative journey begins (1) with the starting mindset and experiences of the visitor. The museum encounter should begin to deepen or diversify understandings. (2) This naturally leads to the building of new ideas, which may begin to hint at new possibilities. (3) These new possibilities foster a dissatisfaction with previous mindsets where they are incompatible with new paradigms. (4) The final stage of the journey is to support the internalization of these new perspectives and convert them into habit and the permanent reorganization of ideas (Snyder 2008).

Many museums are indeed creating experiences of this nature (see for example Janes & Sandell 2019), utilizing their creative and curatorial abilities to bring new dimensions to the collections and displays. Mid-pandemic, the Whitney Museum planned an exhibition of artworks produced during the crisis, with a view to 'tackle the health pandemic, structural racism, and demands for social and racial justice' (Di Liscia & Bishara 2020). Whilst the exhibition was cancelled, it does highlight an attempt at rapid response to an evolving situation with a view to enabling societal change. Janes and Sandell draw attention to other, more long-established initiatives, such as the inspirational work of the Royal Ontario Museum to re-see its African collections and move from an approach that instigated widespread protest for its colonial approach towards one which attempts to 'open a space of intersections and experiences that address contemporary issues and evoke a more fluid and complex sense of belonging' (Forni 2017, 208).

3. Evaluate long-term success – share results, refine the offer and repeat.

The Holy Grail for museums is long-term impact, yet Falk and Dierking, the great champions of free choice learning, point out that research has often been limited and modest in scope. It is time for a collective approach to assessing, communicating and redirecting museum activity towards supporting individuals to transform the world around them.

'Investigations of free-choice learning also have historically been bounded, e.g., visitors to a specific museum, often a single exhibition, framed by the duration of a single visit' (Falk and Dierking 2019, 6).

Those institutions that create transformative experiences would benefit from collaboration in the development of evaluative frameworks. However, with institutions of almost every conceivable format it can be difficult to reach consensus. For example, the report 'Museums, Environmental Sustainability and Our Future' (AAM, 2013) comprehensively lists a range of options for converging action on the issue of sustainability; from adopting external accreditation systems through to developing bespoke measures for museums. Moving beyond diverse recommendations towards concerted action is the challenge at hand.

In the same year, 2013, the Museums Association in the UK launched its 'Museums Change Lives' initiative (MA 2020) which appraises museum impact on a wide range of societal issues. Enlightening case studies, impactful campaigns and evaluation schemes are highlighted on their website. A number of these, such as the UCL Museum Wellbeing Measures Toolkit, are utilizable by museums to review their own initiatives. If techniques for measuring impact are embraced, if museums stop reinventing the wheel with new schemes and they share findings in a consistent manner, then there is the potential for both improved practice and the sector could better advocate for its impact.

Some may be nervous about museums being so intentional in their desire to foster new thoughts and actions, and it could be considered overstepping of the natural remit of these institutions. Doing so will pose significant challenges as museums strive to understand complex issues, scan the horizon to avoid being swept away by transient issues, and craft thoughtful, creative and transformative experiences.

This is where the skill of museum professionals and the strength of governance of institutions and the sector will come to the fore. Developing both the skills and the conviction that museums are there proactively to support society is what is needed. This can steer the sector into the post-Covid world and finally answer Janes' criticism,

ensuring the sector is outward focussed rather than navel gazing and that it grows to embrace a positive role in shaping post-Covid societies. 'We are in the process of reinventing what natural history museums are for,' says Johnson, Director of the National Museum of Natural History. 'Museums can play a much more impactful role than they have in the past 50 years' (Pennisi 2020).

### Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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