

Engaging object agency: new ways of design learning and being for young people in the museum

Alice Hellard, Goldsmiths, University of London
alice.hellard@gold.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

This research investigates object intra-actions with young people on school visits in the UK design museum. As an important aspect of designing, agency in relation to learning is under-researched in museum studies, and this is especially lacking in research that focuses on learning during secondary school visits to design museums. Further exploring agency through religious-political dimensions, another under-researched area is religious influences in museology broadly, and in museum learning in particular. These influences are pertinent to learner and object agency due to their historical proscription of certain values and structures to knowledge and experience of the design object and its representations in the museum, and as such they co-constitute the entanglement of this research. The research aims to disrupt the status quo by using a design and new materialist methodological approach to make sense of and, where possible, make visible intra-actions between objects within this entanglement.

This paper is intended as a discussion piece which examines the historically imbued nature of design learning for young people in school visits to the museum, including some analysis of contemporary practice in London museums. This frames a number of key questions to be explored further through the conference presentation. Agential realism (Barad, 2007) underpins the theoretical-methodological framework which also supports my position as learner-researcher, and this positioning is further enhanced by my professional experience in London museums, schools and the university. The research identifies alternative pedagogies for both schools and museums in this context that are co-located between design and technology learners and museums as entangled producers of knowledge. This is a radical re-imagining of design pedagogies in museums and school classrooms that contributes to the multi-stakeholder dialogue on decolonising methodologies within design and technology education.

Keywords: museum-based design pedagogies, object-based learning, design and learner agency, decolonising design & technology learning

1. INTRODUCTION

Taking place in London, UK, this research is focused on entanglements of learning between design and technology (D&T) departments in schools and museums that house design-centred collections – for example the Design Museum and the V&A Museum – and considers how and where learner and object agency is located as part of a school visit. This paper is intended as a discussion piece that explores some of the unseen agencies that may be active within this context. It initially considers the nature of informal learning in museums, framed by the historical development of UK museums out of Christian-colonialism (Findlen, 2004; Barrett, 2012), suggesting that in the contemporary museum the agency of objects can be inhibited (Morgan, 2017). The paper goes on to discuss the relevance of agency to learning and pedagogy in the design museum (Hohenstein and Moussouri, 2017; Charman, 2010) and to design learning in schools (McLain, 2022; Barlex, 2014). In this research agency is defined as the ability to act in the world, and in the literature review pedagogy refers to informal learning apparatuses that include object selection, methods of display and museum architecture, as well as some of the more formal approaches by museum learning teams. In the second part of the paper I discuss current approaches for design learning for young people in museums, bringing together related theory in design and technology education and my own experience as a design and technology teacher, a museum learning facilitator and a teacher educator. The paper concludes with a brief outline of the practice research and framework-methodology, which includes agential realism (Barad, 2007), object oriented ontology (Harman, 2018) and ontological designing (Willis, 2006), framing a number of questions for conference participants to consider. Design methods and the agency of design (Fry, 2020) are central within both the research entanglement and the framework-methodology.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Learning and pedagogy in the museum

Museums are sites of learning in both a formal, cognitive, sense, and in ways that are much broader, including the emotional, attitudinal and aspirational (Hohenstein and Moussouri, 2017), that bring learning together with communication, culture and identity (Hooper-Greenhill, 2007). Influential theories include Dewey's experiential learning (Dewey, 2015), Piaget's (1951) constructivism and Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivism, with Freire's (1996) critical pedagogy and associated theory also widely cited in the field for its influence on democracy and social justice. What underpins each of these interconnected approaches is the conception of learning as personal meaning making, or interpretation, which is bitty and takes place gradually (Hohenstein and Moussouri, 2017). Falk and Dierking (2018) argue that learning from museums takes place across three distinct contexts (personal, social and physical) over long periods of time, and this can be likened to the ongoing process of becoming in critical pedagogy (Freire, 1990, 2000) and Dakers' (2014) theory concerning the development of technological literacy.

Museums the world over are considered to have pivoted in their purpose from the 1990s, now focused on the experience of audiences over the knowledge contained in their collections (Hooper-Greenhill, 2007). However, there are institutional struggles and within the museum learning is considered to remain a contested area (Hein, 2012). For Kristindóttir (2017) there is tension between pedagogy and museology, with pedagogy a word often left out of discussions within institutions and the wider field regarding visitor engagement. This may be indicative of the politics and silos formed as a result of funding and reporting structures (Dewdney et al., 2013) and of perceptions of knowledge and authority (power) between curating and learning within institutions (Wood, 2019). I am initially considering museum learning as an holistic and core aspect of museum practice. This is because viewing the learning experience as a whole also includes the experience of the space, methods of display, and the selection of objects, for example, all of which museum learning professionals have little control over (Dewdney et al., 2013).

2.2. Religious-political object orientation

The history of museum development in Europe comes out of a long tradition of Christianity and education (Barrett, 2012) and while contemporary museums are secular in that they are outwardly neutral to religion (Buggeln et al., 2017), this literature points to a complex entanglement suggesting that some of the museum's methodologies remain imbued with Christian and, since the mid-nineteenth century, Christian-colonial influences. Modern museums were seen as public structures of authority to educate the masses and demonstrate progress and power (Findlen, 2004), but Christian influences also informed exhibition design. Perceived as the highest order sense, sight was foregrounded by the Jesuit educational system in the early period of museum development, whose optical formatting techniques included chronological display (Preziosi, 2004) and the emblematic use of a heading, image and panel of text (Potteman, 2000). While there are arguments about the extent to which other senses are valued in contemporary culture, and the possibility that the dominance of visuality has been overstated (Howes, 2003), it is also acknowledged that contemporary design museums have tended to borrow this preference for visuality from the art museum (Charman, 2011).

In the design museum, forms of display are considered particular to the domain of design, and as such they help to assert that design is “the reification of ideas into material form” (Charman, 2016, p.139). In the contemporary museum the visitor's experience of design remains typically through looking (Charman, 2011) and reading an interpretation label, often within a chronological and thematic system, which I suggest can be aligned with the Jesuit emblem (Potteman, 2000). However, Fry points out that the reification of design constitutes a misunderstanding of the nature of design, because it casts shade over the unseen ontological assemblages and agencies of design (Fry, 2020). Preziosi (2014) notes that reification in the museum represents a separation between subject and object, whereby the object is staged outside of its own history; a mere representation of itself and the socio-historical subject it has come out of. This, he argues, demonstrates a secular religiosity that confers symbolism onto the object which is further generated through the hierarchies of academic disciplines (Preziosi, 2014). Visual culture is considered to dominate the contemporary museum landscape (Promey, 2017), and to have contributed to the museological separation between subject and object, which constitutes a certain kind of colonial ‘othering’ (Classen and Howes, 2006).

Beyond the design object, it is argued that many museum objects with religious origins are displayed in the contemporary museum as ethnographic artefacts, stripped of their spiritual meanings in favour of beauty or historical significance (Paine, 2014). Morgan (2017) suggests that this echoes curatorial habits of the colonial period, whereby objects were abstracted from embodied contexts in order to demonstrate progress and power, implicating Christianity and its “promotion of the ameliorating effects of civilisation” (Morgan, 2017, p.121). Promey (2017) contends that museum institutions have always been part of the process of secularisation, with certain religious values deliberately conferred through museum display in the eighteen and early nineteenth centuries. This is argued to have been a very effective strategy for democratising and secularising modern social life, which also had the effect of obscuring (though not eradicating) religion and belief (Preziosi, 2004). Nye (2019) explains that the religion-secular relationship emerged through the process of colonialism, with each needing the ‘other’ in order to “colonise, civilise and defeat” (Nye, 2019, p.17).

It is considered no coincidence that recent interest in the representation of religion in museums comes at a time when secularisation theory is also debunked (Promey, 2017). Museums are considered by some to be secular sites of religiosity; the sacred space or ‘temple’ (Duncan and Wallach, 2004) which presupposes public faith in the power of the museum and the museum objects’ authenticity or truths (Suarez, 2019). Museum architecture is argued to design certain religious values and beliefs into the museum experience (Duncan and Wallach, 2004), which is just one way in which colonial power and forms of ‘monotheistic universalism’ are thought to be visible in the contemporary museum (Suarez, 2019). This, I suggest, demonstrates something of the agency of design (Fry, 2020) in-relation with Christianity and colonialism within this context. Hervieu-Léger (2006) points out that the casting of social movements or activities such as sport, for example, as secular religions is based on a social inscription of sacredness and meaning-making which, in the Western context, is derived from a Christian model, and therefore so-called secular religions do not in fact replace the Christian tradition but continue it. While I am not explicitly involving religion or religious objects in this research, suggestions that an effect of Christian-colonialism and secularisation is to mask meaning, and that museology has a tendency to separate subject and object, have implications for learner agency.

2.3. Entangled agencies

A relatively young academic subject, the history of design has to a large extent been determined by industrialisation and globalisation, and therefore does not escape its own difficult encounters with representations of people and places that are tied to colonialism (Williams, 2007; Msila and Gumbo, 2016). Design is also contrarily seen as both profoundly secular by its nature, and as having “replaced the hand of God,” in that once initiated by human activity, design can continue to design itself (Fry, 2018), and people (Willis, 2006). Fry argues that this fact, and the ethics of design, are little understood by the structures of design, especially so in design education. “Design’s agency does not usually come from it being mobilised with a clear vision of consequences, but rather from its power as an unrecognised structural inscription” (Fry, 2020, p.3). According to Fry, design is everywhere, and its agency can be found, at least in part, in this positioning as always underneath.

In design and technology education in UK schools, learner agency is positioned within critique (Keirl, 2016), context (Stables, 2016), and the process of reflection and action within design praxis (Barlex, 2014), with knowledge for action foregrounded as a distinguishing feature of the subject (McLain, 2022). In museums, visitor/learner agency is under-researched; while it is explicitly addressed by museums for the purposes of visitor engagement and marketing, agency is far less understood in respect of learning (Hohenstein and Moussouri, 2017). In relation to design learning in the museum Charman (2011) discusses Bal's theory of the 'expository agency' of the exhibition, whereby the exhibition itself is characterised as an actor doing the 'speaking' through the accoutrements of curation and exhibition design. In this theory the agency of the visitor/learner is implicitly entangled with the agency of the exhibition, which itself renders invisible the agency and selections of curators (Charman, 2011). Against the perception that contemporary museums continue to convey Christian-colonial attitudes (Morgan, 2017; Soares, 2019) that also decontextualise the object and obscure its networked relationships between human and non-human things (Morgan, 2017), this kind of exhibitionary agency might be seen as problematic. Within the museum this can, I propose, suggest a separation of subject from object through the predominant use of visual representation (of ideas as well as people and places) as a methodology. Representation is argued to be a problem as it serves to reflect 'sameness' and reproduce associated problems rather than to find new meanings (Barad, 2007). In this dynamic the agency of the museum object itself has begun to be considered within the museum (Sherritt, 2019; Hood and Kraehe, 2017), and this is one of the central questions of my research. In considering the historical-present context of museum architecture, object selection and display, alongside more formal design pedagogies, I aim to set the scene for the investigation of the agencies of the design object on display in-relation with the agencies of learners.

3. DISCUSSION

3.1. Design learning in and between schools and museums

Object-based learning is a distinguishing feature across museum-based learning and the design and technology classroom in the UK, though the nature of both can be decidedly different. For schools there is a little literature that addresses how objects can be used to enhance design learning (Stables, 2000), and some critique of school practice around product analysis (McLellan and Nicholl, 2011). In my experience as a teacher and teacher educator this critique highlights some of the issues with prevailing approaches in UK secondary schools, where product analysis activities can be cursory and formulaic and can involve students looking at images and representations of objects rather than handling the objects themselves, often as part of the 'research' stage of a design process. Object-based learning has an extensive research base for museums and higher education (Paris, 2002; Farrelly and Weddell, 2016; Chatterjee and Hannan, 2017), and in UK museums there has been some research into approaches to object based learning as part of the distinctive nature of museum-based design learning workshops for young people (Charman, 2010). However, the identity of formal design museum pedagogies for young people is not extensively researched and this, alongside learner agency, highlights a further gap in the literature.

In parallel with the decline of D&T in UK schools in recent years, there have been significant developments in the forms of engagement by typological museums with schools, with some institutions explicitly advocating for the school-based subject in the face of such challenges (Block, 2017). Delivery models include self-guided visits, workshops for school groups, ‘outreach’ work in schools and online resources. Notably there are now at least four national design competitions for secondary aged students led by museums and cultural organisations, most of which focus on human-centred design contextualised by real-world challenges or themes. Programmes with a national reach such as these are seen to be important vehicles for driving engagement (a key performance measure for museums); they are relatively inexpensive to resource because they are driven by digital engagement (Murphy, 2021) and can be high profile and wide reaching (Spielman, 2019). They can also drive direct engagement with museum professionals and collections, either through in-person school visits to the museum or through online remote learning provision. For schools, the competition model is often seen as beneficial as it provides resources for teaching about and for design in a semi-structured way, and often includes input from practising designers which helps schools to address frameworks mandated by UK government policy (see [Gatsby Benchmarks](#), for example).

In addition to these models of engagement, standalone in-person visits are offered by museums, which I am focusing on in this research. From my experience in London museums, these typically involve a free choice visit to one or more galleries and may include a workshop session delivered by a museum learning facilitator or educator. During free choice visits schools can draw from ‘off the shelf’ supporting resources provided by the museum, which may relate explicitly to themes in collections or a current temporary exhibition, for example, and workshops can be selected from a menu of themes. Despite being seen as sites of informal learning and not bound by the formal assessment requirements of schools (Hooper-Greenhill, 2007), museums increasingly make clear links to the national curriculum and relevant key stages on many of their resources and through their programmes (Briggs, 2022). In my experience as a D&T teacher and museum educator museums can help to emphasise the connections between design and technology, and technology and society, while also raising the profile of designing activities in schools.

However, through my practice I have observed some conflicting relationships between schools and museums. During one museum session I led, the class teacher sat in the corner of the room for the duration of the 90-minute workshop, opting to observe their Year 9 students participating in the learning activities. At the end of the session, we engaged briefly in conversation as the class filed out, when the teacher exclaimed “you mean *you’re* a D&T teacher?” There were conversations with museum colleagues at the time about school visits being seen as a ‘nice day out’ and during other sessions I perceived siloed discourses about design between design professionals, museum learning facilitators and school teachers, as well as frustration from museum colleagues about siloed practices within the museum. Rather than point to the passivity of teachers, all of this seemed to highlight conflicts between the pressures of school-based curriculum delivery in terms of procedural and factual knowledge and the tacit and haptic knowledge that museum learning programmes can implicitly and explicitly invoke, as well as to draw attention to perceptions of the authority of the ‘expert’ other from within (and between) institutions. I suggest that the relationship between schools and museums is complex and in

focusing on content has the potential to decentralise personal meaning-making for young design learners.

4. CONCLUSION

As discussed in the literature review, in school-based design learning agency is often directed towards and through human-centred designing activity, through critique, context and decision making, and in my experience this is also true in museum-based approaches. However, agency is a dynamic network that also involves identity, culture and belief within our ability to act in the world. Diversity and inclusion are increasingly addressed within museums and schools through content and representation, which makes differences visible, but practices that connect the networked agencies between learners and objects can be harder to see within the museum context outlined above. Within current discourse on decolonising school-based design learning it is considered important to identify methodological approaches that go beyond representation (Prajapat et al., 2022). Prioritising methodology, this research seeks to make visible and reposition agency in design learning in museums within the full entanglement of objects involved, in ways that disrupt current programmatic and/or disciplinary focused approaches to learning about design through objects.

In Autumn 2023 I will undertake the practice research with a group of Year 12 design and technology students and their teacher. Theirs is a large comprehensive school located in east London, serving a diverse community with a very high proportion of students with English as an additional language and a high number of students with SEND (Ofsted, 2018). The framework-methodology for the practice draws from object oriented ontology (OOO) (Harman, 2018), ontological designing (Willis, 2006) and agential realism (Barad, 2007) in order to identify the hierarchy of objects involved in the research context and make visible the possible intra-actions within this entanglement. Using design methods and processes that also make visible the agency of design (Fry, 2020) participants will engage in a number of workshops, including a visit to a London museum, using design to respond to intra-actions they identify. In the conference presentation I will illustrate the approaches taken to reposition and reframe learners' relationships with objects on display. As stakeholders in design learning from a range of sectors and disciplines, contributors and participants at PATT40 are located within the research context and can make a valuable contribution to the research. I am keen to explore and discuss our collective, individual and different perspectives and I hope that this paper and the following questions provide a starting point for dialogue:

5. KEY QUESTIONS

- (i) How do you locate learner agency in design and technology education?
- (ii) How and where is the agency of the object located in design learning?
- (iii) How recognisable to you are the issues discussed here around power, agency and authority in contemporary museum- and school-based learning about design?

- (iv) How do we do and experience dialogues about religious and political issues and design with young people?

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