
Higher education students involved with cultural heritage; a traditional audience eager to use new methods

David O'Brien
University of Plymouth

University students and ex-university students have been traditional audiences for and providers of cultural documentation. The process of documentation can be viewed as a dynamic interchange. This is particularly useful when examining precedents (in this case the Chinese Ming dynasty encyclopaedia) for salient features relevant to the present day and in offering a rationale for partnerships in the documentation process.

Background

Over the last decade or so the topic of learning and education in museums has been written about by a number of thorough and perceptive writers. It would be wrong to cite individuals though collectively they have helped to redefine the educational role of the museum in the latter part of the 20th century and their works will continue to be influential well into the 21st century. Organisations such as ICOM, internationally and the Museum Documentation Association (now **mda**), Group for Education in Museums (GEM), Museums Association and others in the UK, figure largely in the change in attitude of concerned parties to the role of the museum in Britain. The same period has also seen dramatic shifts of emphasis in higher education¹ in Britain with a larger proportion of the eligible population becoming students in higher education and also a broader cross section of the population. Teaching and learning methods have also undergone a transformation. The didactic emphasis has diminished with a greater concentration on student centred independent learning. Indeed the move away from didacticism was identified by Malcolm Knowles (1977)

as a characteristic of adult learning (androgogy) and referred to by Hooper-Greenhill (1994), Bennett (1995) and Hein (1998) as an important factor in adult learning in or with museums. These two changing and fundamental aspects of British society can be broadened to an international level. There are some countries that make a fuller use of information and communication technology (ICT) in higher education than the UK. Australia and the United States, for example, have taken up the challenge of distance learning with universities that exist almost entirely as virtual universities. Anne Fahy (1995 : 82-96) presents an excellent international survey of ICT in museums with Canada and its concerted documentation process (Canadian Heritage Information Network - CHIN) being singled out for praise. There are thus parallel to the virtual universities, many examples of virtual museums or exhibitions. Therefore what I have described as a traditional audience is in fact in transition as are the providers of cultural information. The traditional and enduring elements though, are the close symbiotic relationship between the audience and providers, and the dynamic process of documentation.

Documentation as a process Anne Fahy (1995 : 96) in the last sentence of her concluding paragraph stresses the dynamic interaction.

We must never lose sight of the fact that to communicate, we must have something to say, some information we want to transmit, and to do this we need to return to the heart and lifeblood of the museum, the object and its associated information.

Documentation is invariably a dynamic process that relates to factors such as knowledge systems (epistemes) - see Hooper-Greenhill (1994:64),

Bennett (1995:95-96), audience, information systems, societal structure and so on. From the countless bits of information available a selection has to be made and then preserved for (hopefully) some form of communication. The dramatic enlargement of the mass of recorded information in the 20th century and the predicted increase in the 21st century seemingly presents archivists librarians and curators with a challenge and at the same time a problem. The twin and perennial problems of what to document and for whom (or what in the case of machines) is not an issue confined to the 20th century though the magnitude of the information explosion almost leads into speculation that this is unique to the present and the foreseeable future. It may be profitable to examine a period when the process was similar and extract key and congruent points pertinent to our 20th/21st century dilemma.

The Ming encyclopaedia as a historical example of the process. The Chinese printed encyclopaedias² of the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) provide an historical comparison of documentation taking place within a society undergoing an information explosion and transformation. From this example there are crucial durable elements not the least being the flexibility of the Chinese written language, the role of adult education, and the role of the object and the importance of place. These four alone are worthy of consideration. as they are pertinent to contemporary issues.

- The language - communication standardised. The Chinese written language was flexible. It could, because it was pictographic and ideographic, accommodate dialects and different vocalisations. It also provided the lingua franca of the scholars.

- Agreed methods of education - standardised audience. The methods were didactic initially leading to the written examination. The encyclopaedia was not thought of as a primer as they had been compiled by scholars for scholars. The encyclopaedic documentation was provocative and open ended, closer to aims of contemporary adult learning.
- The role of the object - context more important than the object. In Ming dynasty China there were imperial and private collections of scrolls, porcelain, jade, etc. These were not for the general public and access was strictly limited to the cognoscenti, in some respects not unlike the entry requirements for the British Museum in its early days. Knowledge and information about objects were starting points with the viewing of the object being the goal.
- The importance of place - setting the tone for the communication (learning) process. The Chinese scholars insisted that the communication process took place in the right surroundings. The opening of the books or the scrolls was part of the focussing activity. This was again understanding that adult learners want a learning environment conducive to reflection and introspection.

If the documentation process is to be measured as successful then usefulness is likely to be one of the strongest endorsements with longevity being a close second. The documentation and documentation methods used in China were durable, lasting as they did at least from the 11th century to the beginning of the 20th century and Chinese scholars used the encyclopaedia as the starting point for scholarly research. It would seem from the four aspects that there is harmony in the dynamic interchange and this would again suggest some merit to be gained from transposing this to the late 20th/21st century and the audience specified in the title.

The relevant documentation process elements are transposed from the historical example to the theme. The

following points are a development of the key issues of the Ming encyclopaedias transferred into the context of the paper's theme. They are not meant to be exhaustive but to highlight areas for discussion.

The language - communication standardised

- Computer language has flexibility and can be standardised.
- Digitising should be a priority rather than worrying about technical issues.
- Documentation should also preserve the nuances of the indigenous language yet at the same time translate readily into the world's major languages
- Document appearance can be preserved through portable document files (pdf). The appearance of a manuscript or a letter from an artist is sometimes as important to a student as is the content.
- ICT methods should be understood and accessible by the audience as well as the provider of information.

Agreed methods of education - standardised audience. Higher education is likely to become standardised in general methods with an increased use of ICT to contend with:

- Diminishing funds.
- Increasing student numbers.
- Wider ability range.
- Assurance of quality standards (value for money) This in some instances attacks core values of some universities and some countries will want to preserve national institutions. Nevertheless there is a strong global imperative to move to student centred learning or problem based learning (PBL). The imperative is strong (especially when dictated by finance) though not quick acting and it could be the middle of the 21st century before there is any significant world wide change.

The role of the object - context more important than the object

- The context is ably served by the WWW as a tool. In practice the associative elements of documentation are not exploited.
- Student centred learning places a great emphasis on the context to enable breadth to develop in the learning process.
- Greater access to world culture through hyperlinks.
- Access to different levels of information in a locality.

Higher education in Great Britain has often seen a symbiosis between museum collections and university courses. The Oxford University museum or the Courtauld Institute and the Courtauld Gallery are good examples of this happening. Teaching collections were often found to be inadequate in the pluralistic cultural climate of the late 20th century though were good collateral to attract research projects and monies. Sue Pearce (1994: 19-29) amongst others has stressed the importance of contextualising for an effective interpretation of objects. The framework of late 20th/21st century cultural theory (Saussure, Barthes, Derrida et al) also supports a learning process based on this premise.

The importance of place - setting the tone for the communication process

- Museum web sites tend to continue the corporate identity through to all aspects of communication. Higher education students generally want the information quickly and are irritated by waiting for animated logos, etc. to download.
- Adult learners like to create their own learning environment.
- E-mail is a preferred system of communication though voice and image may take over as the quality and dependability of the technology improves.

These four points emphasise the dynamic interchange between the documentation process and the higher education student audience. The following example of recent student work at the University of Plymouth will help to illustrate some of the factors.

The student project

For part of a project a second year BA (Hons) Heritage student chose to examine a fragment of a German First World War Zeppelin that his great uncle had made into a small picture frame.

Evaluating the project the following emerged:

- Local resources (local history societies etc.) are important though not accessible on the internet or through e-mail.
- It seemed that the Zeppelin museum had not heard of the local archives in the UK.
- The Zeppelin museum was interested in the object and encouraged dialogue.
- The student was treated as a customer by some rather than a partner with information to share.
- The object had a lesser significance, to the research process at the end of the project than at the beginning.
- The emphasis moved from object to place, events and people as the project developed.
- The Imperial War Museum photographs became secondary artefacts of interest as the research process developed. An evaluation of other student projects show similar issues emerging and others supporting the four points.

Conclusion

There is a need to realise that because of new methods of documentation traditional partnerships need to be re-established. Chasing new audiences, laudable enough, may actually lose sight that old or traditional audiences

may be different. The Web and information and communication technology offer the potential for greater enfranchisement and for more to be involved in the dynamic information interchange (more so than in ancient China.) Though by the close, seamless relationship between user and provider, the Chinese saw wisdom in partnership and the involvement in a dynamic process. All parties should be there to encourage scholarship and partnership not merely one group to provide information and the other to diffidently devour it. In a consumer orientated society there is always the temptation to view processes in terms of commodities to be transacted. This gives the picture of one way traffic or a severed artery rather than nourishing or invigorating the world body. There are great benefits to be gained by all from a dynamic interchange in the documentation process of world cultural heritage.

- 1 Higher Education is a term used in Britain for higher diploma, degree level and post-graduate education. This is mainly confined though not exclusive to the university sector.
- 2 See Joseph Needham (1959 -74), *Science and Civilisation in China*, Cambridge for an account of the technical changes that occurred prior to and during the Ming dynasty. Emperor Yung Lo (1403-24) commissioned the first Ming encyclopaedia. It took five years to complete and involved 3,000 scholars.

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