For Real! Museum Learning in a Digital Age

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About MUSA: Quick Facts

Museum Collections Unit

- 115,000 objects, 600 years of history, 8 collections
- 52,000 visitors p/a across 3 public venues
- 7000 participants p/a in learning programme
- 3-4 temporary exhibitions p/a
- 12 members staff (8.6 FTE)
- Won ASVA Best Visitor Experience Award 2016
Digital Engagement

- Digital learning environments, e.g. GLOW
- Mobile apps
- Virtual worlds

- Content on umbrella sites
- Collections microsites
- Social media
'Through A Glass Darkly’ Project

A collaboration between the School of Classics and MUSA funded by the Leventis Foundation:

The Bridges Collection
- 184 artefacts from Cyprus
- Date from Bronze Age to Byzantine period
- Originated as a private collection
- Located in a University teaching space
Project Aims

- To improve public access to the University’s archaeology collection through digitisation
- To provide context for artefacts
- To investigate whether people are more likely to perceive 3D digital material as ‘art’ or ‘archaeology’
- To compare learning potential of different types of interpretation and inform museum policy
What was involved?

- 3D digitisation of artefacts
- Creation of website and project blog
- Planning of research experiment
- Creating replicas for use in ‘feely box’
- Mini exhibition
Gathering data

Possible approaches
- Questionnaires
- Observation
- Interviews
- Focus groups

Sampling
- Different ages
- Specialist vs general interest
- Within and beyond University

Total: 94 participants (9 groups)
The experiment!

https://sketchfab.com/bridges
Art or Artefact?

- Lots of discussion about definition of ‘art’
- Objects in case and on computers more likely to be seen as ‘art’
- Decorative or ornamental pieces more likely to be seen as artistic rather than functional objects

‘If it is a bowl or lamp etc. then I see it as a functional object rather than art. But then if it is a figurine it is easier to see its artistic merit’
(Mixed faculty group)
Museum Case

- Contemplative, solitary experience
- Shorter time looking
- Assumed material must be more special/valuable
- Labels contributed to understanding
Feely Box

- Mixed response depending on age and interest
- Focused on form, weight, texture
- Tendency to associate with functional, domestic objects
- Provoked further interest in display case
Digital 3D Reconstructions

- Mixed response, depending on age and prior knowledge
- Most discussion and group interaction amongst kids
- Solitary experience for adults - some felt 'distanced' from the objects
- Research tool for students

“It felt like just another computer image – one of 100s that are available on the internet”
Object Handling

- Most popular option for adults
- Liked being able to see and feel objects at same time
- Helped people understand original context & function
- More enthusiasm and group interaction
- Sense of connection to maker
Impact on Museum Policy

- Choice of media can affect visitor perceptions – possible bias!
- Provide several ‘routes’ to understand objects
- Locate interactives close to original artefacts
- Provide object handling opportunities
Digitisation: Lessons Learned

- Suitability of objects for photogrammetry (colour, shape, size)
- Need at least 40-50 images per object
- Allow time to ‘tidy’ images
- Learn from experience of other organisations
- Back-up everything!
Future Plans: Research & Teaching

- Virtual museums
- Independent research within and beyond the University
Future Plans: Engaging Schools

“As with literacy, numeracy and health and wellbeing, digital literacy should be placed at the heart of all learning”

What?
- Support Curriculum for Excellence
- Enhance archaeology workshops at MUSA and in the classroom
- Provision of pre/post-visit resources

How?
- Consultation with teachers and pupils
- Further development / user-testing of models in schools and clubs
Further information

Website
http://openvirtualworlds.org/omeka/exhibits/show/bridgeshome/project

Blog
https://thebridgescollection.wordpress.com/blog/

Facebook
https://www.facebook.com/bridgescollection/

Publications
R. Sweetman, A. Hadfield, S. Mirashrafi, H. Sycamore:
Art or Artefact: The Role of 3-D Viewing in Museums, Journal of Material Culture (submitted 2017)
The Project Team

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