

Didart

connecting children with museums

DIDART PROJECT EVALUATION

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The aim of this paper is to present the contributions of *Didart* to the field of museum art education. *Didart* has been evaluated by 15 of my museum art education students. This evaluation traces some *Didart's* strong points in relation with other museum education communication devices. Secondly, it underlines how this experience can help in building a sense of professionalisation and exchange between museums and universities. Thirdly, it reflects on the relevance of setting opportunities for innovation and communication.

Evaluation has to be applied to the various goals and outcomes (Loomis, 1987) that the museum educator has set in any program. Both, the museum educator and museum evaluator have to establish a team relationship in order to succeed in the clarity of method and findings that this method leads to. As a matter of fact, evaluation is being requested more and more as part of the planning (front-end or formative) or of the exhibit in process (remedial), rather than at the end of any exhibit (summative). This has to do with the willingness of changing or else revising some of the elements, which prove not to work in the exhibition.

However, evaluation is still not widely incorporated in program planning. It wants to bring together museums and visitors. This is one of the reasons the University of Barcelona has been in charge of a pre-evaluation. In this sense, the museum evaluator can act as a changing agent, for it can provide new clues for the understanding of the museum project. This is the main aim of the evaluation of the project: to see how it contributes to the museum community in general and what can be learnt from *Didart*.

EVALUATION PROCESS

This process of evaluation starts with a query I posed to my students. All the students I selected for this study are into Art Education. I selected 15 students between my B.A. and my PhD classes. All of them students brought their impressions and knowledge of Museum Education through by using the first *Didart*'s components designed. We have to take into account that of the students selected are committed to the understanding of museums as places for learning. Moreover, they regard museums as educational resources for the fostering of exchange and communication.

The problem I wanted to solve for this evaluation was as follows:

How is Didart achieving its goals?

This problem would be solved through an attentive look at the web using a grid of questions. The questions were designed to answer the following categories:

- Access (physical, social and intellectual)
- How are the objectives being accomplished?
- How is the audience targeted?

- Web's organisation
- Learning and teaching components
- Project contributions

Each of these categories correspond to the following questions:

1. How clear is the access to *Didart*? Why?
2. Which are the web's objectives? How do you know?
3. Reading the annexed objectives, comment its accomplishments
4. Which is the targeted audience? How do you know?
5. How do you think other audiences could use *Didart*?
6. What would you say about the web's organisation? Which other elements would you add? Which other forms of understanding the art would you organise?
7. What is to be learnt in *Didart*? Which other recommendations would you do?
8. Which do you think are the project innovations? Why?

RESULTS

Art museum education as an exchange process

Access provision

Museum education has been through a process of change since the 70's. Museums started to be regarded as communication tools in the service of communities of learning. Moreover, museum educators have been the ones who have challenged the role of museums as *guardant* institutions. According to MacDonald (1991:163) "museums have tended to view their audiences as homogeneous groups, and to provide services and programs on a single level. [...] This failing of mainstream museums is one reason why we are seeing growing numbers of specialised museums

designed for specific audiences, such as children, indigenous peoples, and specific ethnic communities”. One of the aims of *Didart* is to provide access specific audiences such as children and families. When evaluating physical and intellectual access to the tool, I found the following:

1. Most of the students think *Didart* has an easy access. Most of them think that the access is clear, very visual and attracting. Most of them agree on how physical and intellectual access is being fostered.

S1”*the topics and themes are well-defined and the access to the information is logical.*”

S2 “*the access to the information is very clear and you can see is targeted to a children’s audience.*”

S6 “*Easy access to the information and a good way to use the web to communicate with children from different parts of Europe and the world.*”

S4 “*Easy access when you know the web’s title. Otherwise if look for it as any other information, it will be difficult to find it.*”

S7 “*Home page is direct and it just has the necessary information. Link titles are very clear and give one an overall idea of the content to access.*”

2. However, there are also disagreements on how the page has been organised and designed.

S3 *“It is difficult to find Didart from another information source. The only difficulty I found is that when you enter to the pages, the main titles loose their links and this means you have to go back to the main page in order to access.”*

S5 *“I don’t think its is easy for a kid.”*

S8 *“Too much text. It is not very visual”.*

3. The links that they like are workshops and paths. Some of they think that the interactive guide is a bit boring although it enhances communication and treats children as not passive visitors.

S5 *“ Workshops is my favourite. It is amusing. You can play with museum images from an every day life viewpoint. However, the interactive guide is a bit boring. It seems to me that I have entered a reverential museum and I find this kind of museums boring.”*

S11 *“The web is very graphic but, I think that the image formatting is too similar to the typography that one can get bored. I would enlarge the size of the icons and the works.”*

S4 *“I would differentiate the graphics with the icons.”*

Targeted audience, objectives and learning components

According to Weil, what we have inherited “was a once grand and imposing structure” (Weil, 1999: 258) can no longer function in the same way in our contemporary context, even though it is still part of our cultural system. Traditionally, in this grand structure narrative art was cornerstone, children were not welcomed for art spoke for itself. Museums had to wait till the 70’s when the children’s museum movement and the new school movement arise. This would integrate them as visitors. Children’s museums were seen as laboratories of learning. Children and their families could share their impressions, thoughts and could learn about processes through discovery learning. Discovery learning in this web has been a strategy to respond to traditional art education.

Although there are other theories of learning, such as constructivism, which have proved to be very helpful in museums (Hein, 1998), this web reinforces the playfulness and interaction in order to foster curiosity for the museums represented. This does not mean that each museum education programs uses the same theories of learning. In this regard, museums are places that are “working to provide lively and unthreatening, and at times challenging and contentious context in which contemporary and historical cultural expressions can be created, represented, explored and criticised by increasingly diverse publics that engage with this process in a broad range of ways from pure spectatorship to direct participation.” (Jenkinson, 1994:53). Taking this into account, I would say that *Didart* accomplishes the following aspects:

1. Most of the students agree on the efficacy of using discovery learning in this project.

S6 “*The targeted audience is very clear and the educational component is very well-thought.*”

S10 *“It helps children to understand the content, techniques and styles of the chosen works. Kids have to participate in this inquiry. It gives you the sense that they can learn independently. The web is organised in a way where each visitor can explore what interests them most. All the questions foster new pathways and connections with the other links.”*

S11 *“It fosters discovery learning as a source of enjoyment. Each action proposed has a result and it is funny. Besides, I can choose different ways to approach the information.”*

S8 *“I think the web has clear didactic objectives.”*

2. Some students think it is a good resource for teachers and art and museum education students.

S9 *“Although sometimes it was not clear to me if I was in front of an educational activity or I had to interact, I found it very helpful for teachers and art education students. The book catalogue is very helpful for research programs.”*

S5 *“It is a good way to introduce contemporary art collections from different European museums.”*

S1 *“It is a good way to spread contemporary art European projects and documentation.”*

S3 *“It gives you information on museums and their programs.”*

3. Some students believe it is just targeted for children, while most of them agree in that it is also to adults and families.

S6 *“From the questions you can see, I believe it is targeted to children.”*

S1 *“It is designed for educators and public interested in contemporary art. It is possible to infer it through the language and the subject-matter organisation.”*

S11 *“The web can encompass a wide audience. Interactive elements and pathways can be used for children and adolescents. The rest of activities are well-designed for adults.”*

S4 *“The initial response would be that it is targeted to children and schools. However, if we believe that children are only interested with ‘drawings and colours’, I think it could also be reached for other museums and other educational institutions.”*

Web organization

While evaluating the web organisation, I found that most of the students agree on its accuracy and give interesting suggestions.

S2 *“It is very lineal, but dynamic at the same time. I would add composition elements.”*

S4 *“I would suggest another choice of design. I think this design is too geared through the notion of museums as leisure experiences. I think we should foster a much critical sense of museums in order to not only be related amusement parks or recreational areas.”*

S5 *"I find the virtual class a very good idea. Here children have the opportunity to interview artists and artists can talk to children."*

S15 *"I would suggest an exchange forum to share people's opinions and interests in works of art. I would also suggest people to share their own works of art with the rest."*

S13 *"I would add more images in the main menu."*

In this regard, most of the students agree with the focus of the web and think there is a good interaction between what is to be seen. They all agree that this is an open network of good ideas and proposals.

Museum networks as agents for learning

Another change within the museum community in these last years has been the understanding of the role of museum education as a facilitator for social provision. We all know that "museums alone cannot create a sense of cultural identity. The media and the entertainment industry have much more impact here" (MacDonald, 1991). However, museums links and networks can help creating other places for experiencing art and culture from a much more informed viewpoint. *Didart* is also committed to understanding museum education from a dialogic perspective. Thus, fostering new links and venues between institutions has been seen as being a positive element of this project. The students would say:

1. *Didart* offers the possibility to learn museum literacy.

S6 *"This page is an interesting tool for museum education since it provides some clues on how to see museums as places of learning. I would add some more contents in the future."*

S7 *"It is a good way to insert new venues for contemporary art."*

S2 *"It is a good network for the circulation of contemporary art through museums. All the activities foster imagination and creativity."*

S3 *"It is a good network to promote what each museum is doing in the field of museum art education not only in an international level, but also in a local one."*

Consequently, one of the aims of *Didart* has to do with the recognition that the relevance of museums "to the future development of society lies not merely in their role as repositories of information. It is also in how they use the information to create understanding; or, perhaps, more significantly, how they help their audiences to exploit the information resources in the quest for knowledge" (MacDonald, 1991:162). In *Didart* this quest for knowledge is taken into account during the process design of the project. Its aim is to stimulate children to think and use museums as foci where to foster imagination, inquiry and memory. Thus, the museums and universities involved in the project want to be better communicators.

2. Efficacy of relations between museums has been one of the tenets of the project.

S3 *"In this project appears the most innovative museum art education programs from very well-recognised museums."*

S7 "It is a very good effort to give access to museum art education and research throughout several European museums. People interested in this topic need this sort of networks."

Project Contributions

Facilitating museum education

Traditionally and due to the strong empirical tradition in museum work, museum educators have been regarded as practitioners or communication specialists, rather than as researchers and meaning makers. However, the increasing critical literature both in museums and in the education field, during the last three decades, have contributed to demystify an instructional notion of museum education tied to a 18th century museum conception. At the same time, this literature has provided new grounds for a 20th critique of the modern museumⁱ and fostering new ways of understanding museums as political arenas.ⁱⁱ

This critique sets a wide range of possibilities for challenging the 18th century museum towards the reconstruction of a postmodern one. In this regard, museums can be set in a continuum of theoretical and practical processes, rather than in a disjunction between theory and practice (where curators are in charge of theory and educators are in charge of practice). As Roberts (1997:2) claims “educators have brought visitors’ perspectives to bear on the treatment of collections: how they are displayed, what is said about them, and who does the saying. In doing so, they have raised questions about such core tenets as the sanctity of objects and the authority of curators. By insisting on more shared authority over objects and what they represent, educators have given visitors a voice in determining the significance of collections that as public trust belong to them and their communities”. Consequently, the task of

current museum educators is to provide possibilities for “deciphering interpretation or anticipating and negotiating between the meanings constructed by visitors and meanings constructed by museums”, rather than helping using instructional strategies to transmit the curator’s ideology in relationship with objects and displays.

But, according to Roberts (1997) that educators influence, since the 70s, have influenced in promoting interpretations that reflect visitors’ worlds and experiences, museum educators “as advocates for visitors and their perspectives, museum educators have served as the catalysts of the wider shift to a more context-based definition of knowledge”.

Sharing a common view of professionalization

According to Weil (1990) professionalization is one of the hallmarks of the museum profession as it had been among traditional professions such as medicine and law. One of the strategies to foster museum education professionalization and exchange is a cultural project which has been developed by several European museums and institutions. Each of the have brought their expertise and ideas through the process of design and implementation of the project. One of the aims of *Didart* Project is to facilitate communication between art museum educators within different contexts. And students appreciate this fact.

S15 *"It is a very good way to show that art museum education is also a profession."*

S13 *"By working with different types of museums, Didart fosters dialoguing communities."*

S4 *"It is a good way to link museums with artists and with visitors."*

The most recent cases of professionalization are museum evaluation and museum education demarcated by the year their code of ethics was established (1991). If one revises the code of ethics of both museum evaluation and museum education, one finds the following commonalties and differences:

- A commitment towards the audience. The audience is the standpoint. Museum evaluation is the people's voice (Korn, 1991) while museum education is the people's consultant.
- An integration of the learner, the environment, the subject-matter and the instructor (Falk, 1992) as a means to expand the notion of museum literacy (Stapp, 1992).
- The consideration that the museum is above all a learning environment where informal learning takes place.

In this project evaluation most of my students agree on the former aspects. They appreciate the following:

1. The preoccupation to work with children and the fact that this project has a common ground and shared responsibility.

S8 *"I think it is a good virtual space where to find common ways of organising children's activities."*

S9 *"I think it s a good forum and a good way to share a sense of professionalism. However, in the experimenting contemporary art, I think most of the works are modern art rather than contemporary."*

An opportunity for innovation and communication

Most of the students think that the public can perceive the project as institutions operating in the center of social life, rather out on the margins. By bringing together different institutions education in the web is placed as a cornerstone. Therefore there are becomes a relevant educational material, although some of my students would like to have much more information on the museums' projects, collections and programs.

S6 *"I think this project is a way to promote the Arts from a much more human perspective and this is an innovation."*

S11 *"It is very interesting the notion of reaching artists. I would add a contextual dimension of the Arts."*

S 10 *"It is very innovative and creative because it helps you to picture your own ideas about the artists. It fosters problem-solving. I hope the project expands and provides the user with other European experiences."*

S9 *"I would like to see more museums involved."*

TO CONCLUDE

The evaluation has proved to be very helpful for children, their families, teachers and students in general. It has been evaluated as a good information and communication device.

Secondly, this evaluation has proved that *Didart* is a good chance to think of museums as enjoyable experiences. Moreover, it gives tools to be in contact with

European museums, their programs and resources and also with resource centers, which collect art education histories.

Most of the experiences it provides are regarded as valuable and unique. They are seen as creative and dynamic, since they are based on problem-resolution.

It promotes museum and visitors exchange of ideas. It treats children as active visitors and give them hints and motivation on how to visit the museum before even visiting it.

There is another aspect, which I think it is very important and has not been commented through this evaluation. I refer to the ability to connect some of the permanent collections of European museums under some common umbrella ideas. This has been a very fruitful exchange for all the components of the process. We believe it will set a new way of network relationships.

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