

THE TEACHER AND THE ARTS EDUCATOR AT THE INTERFACE OF MUSEUM AND SCHOOL-BASED LANGUAGE LEARNING

Der potenzielle Zusatznutzen non-formaler Lehre in Fremdsprachenerwerb und Sprachvermittlung sollte nicht unterschätzt werden. Kern der vorliegenden Abhandlung ist ein Dialog zwischen einer Sprachlehrerin und einer Museumsführerin. Im Gespräch erörtern sie, wie ihre unterschiedlichen Disziplinen einander sinnvoll ergänzen können, um das gemeinsam gesteckte Ziel eines Zugewinns in der (Sprach-)Vermittlung zu erreichen und die Lernenden gleichzeitig zu motivieren, sich mit der Kunstaussstellung selbst zu beschäftigen. Sie überlegen zusammen, welchen Nutzen ein Museumsbesuch Sprachlernenden der Sekundarstufe II erbringen kann und vor welchen Herausforderungen Sprach- und Kunstvermittlung stehen mögen. Dabei wird deutlich, dass die Lernenden von einer Zusammenarbeit zwischen ihrer Schule und einem Museum profitieren können, ganz besonders, wenn sich die Lehrenden beider Institutionen zusammentun, um ihre Ziele gemeinsam zu erreichen.

● Lynn Williams
| PH Bern,
Sinje Steinmann
| Freelance

Sinje Steinmann, an experienced arts educator based in Berlin, and Lynn Williams, an English teacher and teacher educator living in northwestern Switzerland, reflect on the role of museum learning for the upper-secondary English language classroom. After setting the scene in terms of the opportunities and challenges involved, they share insights, questions and ideas which emerged in a recent exchange on the subject before offering some concluding thoughts.

Setting the scene

Noted museum scholars Falk & Dierking suggest that we visit museums with all manner of agendas, including 'social and recreational reasons, educational/learning reasons, and reasons related to culture, awe, and reverence'.¹ We can, however, also be a 'fickle public'² and need to be reminded of the relevance of museums, perhaps increasingly in an ever more digital world where we can easily 'view' the Mona Lisa on a computer screen, or perhaps even take part in an

interactive online tour. We – and the young learners we work with – might wonder how much extra value a visit to an actual museum building brings.

We might venture that museum learning is no longer strictly about an expert passing on facts and information, but that instead it is about making clear the reasoning behind museum decisions and facilitating students in engaging with questions such as: Which artefacts have been selected for a particular exhibition and why? How are they connected? Why have they been displayed in this way? What do I, as a visitor to this exhibition, take away with me? In what way has the visit influenced, informed, inspired, or moved me? It is very possible, therefore, that the learning taking place cannot be measured in the typical way, and if we accept this, we ultimately stand to make more progress with our learners.³

As Falk & Dierking note, 'humans automatically form long-term, emotion-laden memories of events and places without

1 Falk & Dierking, 2000: 71.
2 Paris, 2006: 255.
3 Gilbert, 2017.

deliberately attempting to memorize them⁴, which suggests that museum experiences contribute to lifelong learning. Consequently, they argue that ‘museum professionals, be they administrators, curators, educators, or evaluators, need to stop treating the museum experience as if it were some kind of isolated, singular event’⁵. At the same time, ‘if museum experiences are special, it’s not the content itself, even if it’s backed up by the presence of artefacts or staged in immersive environments. These experiences are special because the day you come to a museum is a special day.’⁶

With all these many opportunities and challenges in mind, we decided to pool our respective expertise as a long-standing arts educator and upper-secondary languages teacher to see what we might learn from each other and how we might optimise our museum-based learning with young people.

The arts educator and the teacher in dialogue

Sinje: “Let’s go to a museum!” – It is already a challenging task for a teacher to motivate upper-secondary language learners to learn the language, and then on top on that, museums are currently facing ‘a crisis of attendance’⁷, like other cultural institutions, as they have countless other options for leisure activities to compete with. As a teacher, how do you deal with this two-fold challenge?

Lynn: Museum visits can actually be refreshing for learners, providing a different dimension of authenticity and new input brought about by a change of scene. A museum visit can link to almost anything you are addressing in subject teaching. So, while there are many other things you can do with a school class, most of them won’t be both content-rich AND also offer communicative opportunities in the way that museum visits can. Convincing learners is therefore easy if you frame the visit in the right way and get them excited about what they might find there. Also, if the focus is on communicating content, language becomes a vehicle rather than the focus of attention itself so the language lessons take on a new relevance.

Sinje: I am sure we both share Herz’s list of motivations for a museum visit which mentions six goals: ‘to understand the

*world, ask questions, aid self-understanding, aid critical thinking, enhance interpersonal skills and encourage independent museum visitors*⁸ – goals, in fact, which actually correspond well with some aims of language teaching. A museum certainly has educational purposes, but our exhibitions are not specifically designed for language learners. It is therefore important for us to stay flexible for different types of learners, but it can be difficult to convey the core content of the exhibition whilst at the same time leaving multiple approaches open.

Lynn: Yes, Reeve⁹ discusses how tricky it can often be to attract young adults to museums. On the other hand, findings also show that cultural interest is certainly linked with language learning¹⁰, so museum work can certainly offer a promising complement to classroom work. In my view, student language work connected with museums should go beyond passive understanding. That is, language needs to be activated for students to articulate their reaction to a museum exhibition. It is the teacher’s job to offer language scaffolding so students can develop the necessary linguistic knowledge and competencies. It’s one thing to read those short texts about paintings on site at a museum, and quite another to work out and ultimately actively express what you think of those artefacts.

Sinje: ‘School trips start at school!’, as Jeens¹¹ points out, noting that young adults connect best with museum learning when their visit has been well prepared before it even takes place. So, how might a teacher do that?

Lynn: I’d like to work with Delamatre here. Drawing on her findings when discussing school visits with hundreds of teachers, she concludes that ‘the majority of teachers do not want or need to shoehorn a connection to their curriculum into the visit. Instead, they most often cite the desire for their students to be “exposed” to the museum.’¹² She acknowledges that this might sound quite shallow, but she believes teachers would like students to



Lynn Williams, PHBern, is a teacher educator and experienced teacher of upper-secondary English. She holds degrees in Modern Languages and English Literature and is further qualified in language testing and translation. Lynn specialises in assessment, differentiated instruction, and learning with literature.



Sinje Steinmann, Freelance Arts Educator, teaches Cultural Management at tertiary level and has worked for cultural bodies in Germany and abroad. As a museum guide, she has given tours in several European languages. Sinje holds a degree in Musicology and German Literature and is trained to teach German as a Foreign Language.

If the focus is on communicating content, language becomes a vehicle rather than the focus of attention itself.

- 4 Falk & Dierking, 2000: 65.
- 5 ibid.
- 6 Gilbert, 2017: 298.
- 7 Paris, 2006: 255.
- 8 Herz, 2017: 323.
- 9 Reeve, 2006.
- 10 Evans & Fisher, 2009.
- 11 Jeens, 2018: 75.
- 12 Delamatre, 2017: 308.

“What are you drawn to in this room, and why?”

be motivated enough to return for a later visit. But she also wonders, ‘how will students ever feel they can return on their own if our lessons are so educator-directed?’¹³ That means that over-planning a visit might be counter-productive! It’s often the spontaneous interactions with learners which are most beneficial.

Sinje: Yes, she argues that there is a place for educator-led thinking in museums but that we should not focus so much on this, as it is a resource which cannot be replicated when students return to visit, and after all, we want to set them up for the future. That’s actually a really important point for the museum educator to take to heart – as you mentioned before, that element of being prepared for any learning to be unexpected.¹⁴ As Perry suggests, we need to ‘recognize that all visitors are different and will create their own narratives’¹⁵, so our most important role is to give support and guidance.

Lynn: With the idea of preparation in mind, how far does the museum educator benefit from having teachers carefully prepare for a visit? What would you want to know from a teacher before a school visit?

As museum educators, we shouldn’t feel obliged to stick to just one line of enquiry, one approach.

Sinje: Actually, there really is an interesting challenge in language learning at the museum. Studies have found that, ‘[i]ronically, visitors are much more likely to utilize museums to confirm pre-existing understanding than to build new knowledge structures.’¹⁶ We need the teacher’s perspective so that we are able to tailor our concept to the group. And it’s therefore also important that our pre-prepared material can be easily adjusted as necessary. Furthermore, solid preparation and a meaningful exchange between the teacher and the arts educator is extremely important. Teachers, I believe, are the real educators here. If that kind of partnership is not possible or cannot be realised, Herz recommends that ‘we should offer experiences that we know will have impact regardless of what is happening in the classroom’¹⁷; that is, a museum visit does not necessarily have to fit exactly in the curriculum.

Lynn: Right, so as a teacher on a museum visit you see students moving around a new space. Or one student might notice things in a painting that others don’t. This is useful instant information to a teacher on how a student is reacting to new potential learning.

Sinje: Then what would be your wishes to the arts educator ahead of your visit with the students?

Lynn: Well, a teacher will clearly benefit from answers to the following questions: Is a guided tour involved? What group sizes are appropriate for the chosen exhibition? Do students need to bring anything with them? Logistics matter. Also, assuming it’s a temporary exhibition, that is, one that the teacher has not been previously able to engage with – in contrast to the local permanent collection – the teacher relies on the arts educator to supply background information that the teacher does not have. A museum guide therefore needs to be well-prepared in order to share relevant and helpful knowledge. The guide needs to be aware of different possible levels and areas of student knowledge. This could, for example, include compiling and sharing a catalogue of questions about temporary exhibits so students can prepare for their visit.

Sinje: When conducting a foreign-language tour or similar activities, it is also crucial to pay attention to language. A tour should be just difficult enough in terms of grammar, vocabulary and idiomatic expressions, and should be delivered in a lively and engaging manner. Ideally, this will activate the students and draw them into some kind of dialogue. To quote Perry, let’s see ‘learning as conversation.’¹⁸ Paris agrees with this stance, suggesting that generating discourse around museums and exhibits can usefully bring a range of different opinions and ideas together in a group of learners.¹⁹ One eminently sensible question could be, “What are you drawn to in this room, and why?” as this triggers a personal response in students. As a teacher you are of course also aware of the importance of asking the right questions.

Lynn: Yes, and of asking the right questions of the right people! To return to Falk & Dierking: They observe that the specifics of what is learned is in fact very person-

13 ibid.

14 Gilbert, 2017.

15 Perry, 2012: 34.

16 Falk & Dierking, 2000: 84.

17 Herz, 2017: 318.

18 Perry, 2012: 13.

19 Paris, 2006.

al²⁰, meaning that different learners will respond differently to an exhibit and their takeaways will be highly individual, no matter how homogenous the input. Perry actually notes six motivators around museum learning – those of communication, curiosity, confidence, challenge, control, and play – which, she argues, can be in any balance and which do not all have to be present simultaneously or even at all.²¹ It is the idea of having a choice as to which of these to tap into which is key, as Paris²² and Hohenstein & Moussouri²³ also highlight. So, this would suggest that we can certainly make productive use of questions to direct learner attention whilst also giving them choices, thus personalising the visitor experience. How do you, Sinje, address that personalisation angle? And how do you encourage a personal reaction in student visitors?

Sinje: It's important to know that one model won't suit or please everyone. You will always have those who cannot engage deeply with what you are offering. That's the charm and the challenge of the topic, of course. It's what teachers experience every day, right? You need to make a decision at some point and to be aware of the fact that you are unlikely to please everyone but also to be prepared to employ different approaches, so you can capture learners' attention. I'd say that as museum educators, we shouldn't feel obliged to stick to just one line of enquiry, one approach. Instead, we must feel free to play with different ones.

Lynn: I like that idea of trying out different approaches, and then of course evaluating how effective they are. In that respect, I was encouraged by what I read of Perry.²⁴ In one study, she set about observing visitors and engaging them in conversation to find out what was working and what was not. Her findings drove her to make curatorial adjustments and then later to test these to find out whether the changes made led to greater visitor learning and whether visitor enjoyment was affected in the process. She suggests that museum professionals can gain from insights from instructional design and research, and then from testing the practical application of those ideas.

Sinje: Yes, careful evaluation is very important for us. How do you as a teacher assess the outcome for your students on the most basic level?

Lynn: I'd say that if a student has some kind of personal opinion about the exhibition after viewing it and can frame that opinion accordingly, the whole thing was a success.

Sinje: Yes, definitely. And in order to assure fellow museum staff that any extra effort here will make sense, over the years we have noticed that students can be great multipliers in terms of visitors to the museum. They will tell their family about the visit and may come back with family members.²⁵ This can also be a chance for them to show off some of their newly-acquired vocabulary and language skills, and this successful experience will serve to further deepen and consolidate the learning effect: A true win-win situation.

The importance of student visitors experiencing meaningful and relevant input which goes beyond the confines of the school classroom and which they can process in an individual way

Concluding thoughts

Young people over 11 represent 'a notoriously difficult audience to capture and keep'²⁶ and simply 'making it funky on your flyer'²⁷ is not enough. Instead, young people, the museum visitors of the future, need to 'be involved and feel some ownership'²⁸ and to do so, we must give them agency. This in turn necessitates a democratic approach which involves museums 'handing over power, skills and knowledge to the community, and recognizing and valuing the expertise within those communities, too.'²⁹ As Falk & Dierking put it:

Learners want to be able to "see themselves" within an exhibition, program, even a web site. Consciously or unconsciously, they are seeking ways to connect [...]. In order for this to occur, at some level learners have to understand why this particular experience is relevant to them, and if they attend to it or participate in it, how the experience and information contained within it will enhance their life.³⁰

Our exchange highlighted for us the importance of student visitors experiencing meaningful and relevant input which

- 20 Falk & Dierking, 2000: 153.
- 21 Perry, 2012.
- 22 Paris, 2006.
- 23 Hohenstein & Moussouri, 2018.
- 24 Perry, 2012.
- 25 Filipski & Cuznetov, 2022: 799.
- 26 Reeve, 2006: 52.
- 27 ibid.
- 28 ibid.
- 29 Blackwell & Scaife, 2006: 63.
- 30 Falk & Dierking, 2000: 182.

goes beyond the confines of the school classroom and which they can process in an individual way, that is 'a learner-centred experience where the pedagogy is neither linear nor overtly didactic'.³¹ Furthermore, we saw how important it is to pose meaningful questions and for student learners to have both teacher and museum educator on hand to support them as they work out their answers on both the content and language levels.

With encouraging contemporary offerings in the museum world such as the Young V&A, youth membership groups, opportunities to volunteer, chances to engage in museum music, and fashion initiatives, it is quite possible that young people will discover a new connection to this element of our cultural heritage or feel motivated to reconnect with previous museum experiences. At the same time, it is more than acceptable, Falk & Dierking suggest, for the modern museum not to strive to 'out-Disney Disney'.³²

That is not to say that museum learning should not or cannot be enjoyable – on the contrary, for a learning experience to transform the learner, it benefits from being a positive experience – but 'museums should never compromise on authenticity, and they should never do anything that compromises their standing as neutral and knowledgeable experts'.³³ It is here that the museum comes into its own, as a source of authoritative, original, and meaningful content which can trigger student learning and leave a lasting impression as it does so. Our experience shows us that if you ask a group of learners what they remember from a semester's learning, the class museum visit is likely to be more easily recalled than a stand-alone classroom-based lesson on the passive voice or on the role of the narrator in the current class reader: 'If we're interested in education that has ripple effects over a lifetime, museums are great places to be'.³⁴

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31 Winterbotham, 2006: 177.
32 Falk & Dierking, 2000: 232.
33 ibid.
34 Gilbert, 2017: 299.