

Outside In – Inside Out

A collaborative investigation into community experience of the culture of museums in the North West of England

Introduction

Myna Trustram (Renaissance North West)

An ethnographic account

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Implications for organisations

Nadine Andrews (culture probe: creative research and consultancy)

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Introduction

Myna Trustram

Outside In – Inside Out is a research project commissioned by Renaissance NW¹. Four museums from the NW Museum Hub took part: Bolton Museum, Harris Museum, Preston, Manchester Museum and Tullie House Museum and Art Gallery, Carlisle. The question we wanted the research to answer was, what is the community experience of the culture of the museum? Each museum appointed a volunteer researcher to record on film his or her impressions of the museum. The films capture various aspects of the organisational culture of the museums. The researchers were also asked to keep ‘field notebooks’ in which, like anthropologists, they recorded their experiences and impressions of the museum. Ian Fairweather an anthropologist from the University of Manchester directed the research. He trained and supported the researchers in their role and Joceny Pinheiro a visual anthropologist also from the University of Manchester made the films. Nadine Andrews was a consultant to the project. Her role was to mediate between the museums, communities and the academy as represented by Ian Fairweather. Myna Trustram commissioned the research for Renaissance North West and led the steering group for the project which consisted of a representative (Susan Child, Cheryl Magowan, Gurdeep Thiara and Louise Window) from each of the participating museums. Each representative was responsible for enabling the researcher to enter behind the scenes at the museum.

The project arose from a conversation between staff at the four museums who wanted to examine how the culture of museums hinders them from greater engagement with people who are not regular museum users. The spark for the project came from one museum’s experience of working with their community advisory panel. A brief but frank film had been made of some of the panel members talking about their experience of the museum. Staff who saw the film found it revealing to hear ‘their’ museum described by these users. Thus the idea of outsiders coming into the heart of the museum and insiders hearing the experiences of outsiders was born. The project is underpinned by the idea that any institution has outsiders and insiders. Museums today are required to open their doors to those who were formerly outsiders. This can be an enormously rewarding experience for both outsiders and insiders but the project reveals that it can also be fraught with difficulty.

Unlike much research and evaluation that takes place today in museums this research did not set out to measure pre-determined outcomes. Whilst such measurement is necessary to find out if public money has been appropriately used, such an approach can blind researchers to unexpected outcomes or valuable routes of enquiry that arise during the research process. However, not quite knowing what you’re going to end up with at the end of a process of spending public money is a rare luxury in a performance management culture. In this sense the Renaissance programme is a rare opportunity for museum workers to take risks and is to be applauded for enabling us to do this.

¹ Renaissance NW is part of the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council's Renaissance investment programme to help regional museums increase their capacity and the quality of their programmes. A network of museum hubs has been set up in each English region to act as flagship museums and to help promote good practice. Renaissance NW has invested in a programme of research and evaluation to support this work.

Those who watch the films and read this report will be able to judge whether the risk was worth taking. As ever with work which endeavours to push forward institutions into being more reflective, it is the process, more than the final product, which is of equal if not greater value.

One of the strengths of the project was the collaboration of Ian Fairweather, an academic anthropologist and Nadine Andrews, an arts consultant in leading the work. Although they have written about the work from their own professional perspective, there are themes in common. Both accounts address the way in which the museums operate a hierarchy of knowledge. They argue that the response of the museums to the volunteers was determined in part by this hierarchy.

Ian Fairweather structures his account around the idea that the meeting of museum staff and researchers can enact a similar encounter as that between explorers and a remote tribe, the tribe being the museum staff and the explorers the researchers. This device hopefully enables museum staff to step back and imagine the museum as an institution with a particular culture which might be incomprehensible to outsiders. However, unlike remote tribes, museums today have a political and moral imperative to welcome explorers and to share their treasures with the equally unknown and mystifying strangers.

We are only beginning to try to understand what this encounter entails. We have considerable data on the social and economic profile of our actual and potential 'audiences'. What we know less about are the expectations, conscious and unconscious, which both sides bring to the encounter. As with an encounter between explorers and tribes the potential for misunderstanding is manifold as is the difficulty of having meaningful dialogue. To some extent we will remain strangers to each other. It is the degree of shared understanding that it is possible to achieve that we are currently trying to establish. Outside In – Inside Out has revealed something of those expectations which museum staff and community members bring to each other. The research shows that these assumptions critically determine the nature of the encounter and so we can only benefit from being more aware of them.

The completion of the films and this report does not mark the end of the project. The museums involved are using their increased awareness of their culture to help them develop their critical thinking about their practice. To this end, Nadine Andrews has distilled some of the findings from the research into archetypal organisations in order to help staff analyse the culture of their museum and its particular way of operating. She offers a language and concepts with which to understand organisational cultures. We hope that this report will enable other museums to question their practice in a similar way.

An ethnographic account

Ian Fairweather

Contact Zones

The four museums who participated in the Outside In - Inside Out project have all sought community involvement in a variety of ways, and it is the resulting dialogue that forms the basis of this report. The processes by which museums seek to engage with the competing claims of diverse communities raise questions that are at the very heart of community interest, cultural value and the experience of 'belonging'. It is rarely recognized, however, that the museum as an institution also has a culture, one which may be alien and opaque to community members who try to engage with it. Furthermore this culture is not always apparent to those involved in the museum as familiarity with that culture can render it obscure. This can lead to misunderstandings and occasional breakdowns in the communication process.

This project aims to examine museum culture from the perspective of 'outsiders', in particular, outsiders who have little experience of such a culture. The purpose is to develop an understanding of how 'outsider' experience the museum, in what ways it is accessible and representative and in what ways they feel excluded or constrained by the museum environment. In doing so the project attempts to raise awareness amongst museum staff of the culture they create within the museum. The project is not intended to assess the success of the participating museums or provide a platform for comparison with other museums. Rather its aim is to highlight aspects of the museum's culture for internal discussion and debate. Postcolonial theorist James Clifford has popularized the notion of museums as 'contact zones' where diverse forms of knowledge are brought together. The Outside In - Inside Out project has drawn attention to the way in which museums respond to their 'contacts'.

Methodology

The project has employed an innovative methodology based upon the ethnographic method characteristic of anthropological fieldwork. In a significant departure from this methodological tradition, the ethnographic fieldwork has not been carried out by a trained anthropologist, but by four volunteer researchers drawn from communities local to the participating museums and with varying degrees of experience of visiting and working with museums. For the purpose of this report, the researchers will be known as A, B, C, and D. These volunteers have been given some basic training in ethnography and have been supervised by an anthropologist, but they have also brought to the project their own backgrounds and experiences. They have spent time in the museums as participant observers and interviewed staff, whilst recording and reflecting on their own feelings and reactions to their experiences. All the researchers had their own expectations of museums challenged by the experience in different ways and, in each case, the researcher's experience highlights something that may not have been obvious before.

It is important to stress that this project cannot offer a comprehensive or objective picture of each museum's culture. To even attempt to do so would require a much greater commitment in time, both to the training of the researchers and to the fieldwork itself and it is unlikely that such a commitment could be expected of unpaid volunteer researchers. Furthermore, there are serious theoretical questions about whether ethnography can ever really produce an objective representation of a culture. Its strength as a method lies in its ability to produce richly detailed qualitative data from which important insights can be derived. From this perspective, the practical constraints under which this project has been conducted do not invalidate the methodology.

The researchers' experiences are both personal and subjective and can only provide a snapshot of the aspects of the museums they visited at a particular moment. Nevertheless, it should be remembered that the researchers spent more time and had more access to the culture of the museum than an ordinary visitor would. Their experiences should therefore be able to offer some insight into the way that the museums in question are experienced by members of the public.

In reporting the results of this project it would be unproductive to be too specific about the details of particular events and conversations as it is not my intention to draw attention to particular individuals or criticize practices upon which I am not in a position to comment authoritatively. Furthermore because of the researchers' own backgrounds and interests they focused in different ways on different aspects of the museums, so that certain issues were highlighted in some museums and not others. This does not mean that these issues have no relevance in the museums where they were not raised. On the contrary, it is my contention that the experiences of all four researchers raise questions that could be productively considered in all four museums. Accordingly, I have refrained from identifying the researchers by name or specifying which museum is being discussed at any particular time. I have tried to extract from the four researchers' accounts the issues that I think are of importance in a general way. When I have felt it productive to recount particular events in detail I have resorted to another strategy. I have tried to summarise the researchers' experiences at the four museums in a series of vignettes, each designed to highlight some aspect of the organisational culture they encountered in the museums. These vignettes are loosely based on events that actually happened, but have been partially fictionalized, both to protect the anonymity of those involved and to make more explicit the issues that I think are significant. Therefore, whilst it may be possible to identify some aspects of the vignettes they should not be treated as accurate renderings of the events in question

Finally, in order to give shape and structure to this report I have found it useful to present the findings in the form of a familiar narrative often associated with anthropology. This is the story of first contact between a remote and isolated 'tribe' and the first representatives of a distant civilization, be they missionaries, explorers or conquerors. In our story however, it is the museum community that takes the role of the 'tribe' and our researchers that of intrepid explorers.

First contact

'First contact' scenarios are interesting to anthropologists because they reveal the prior expectations of both parties. When Captain Cook landed in Hawaii in 1778 he expected to find savages who would be awed by the power of Europeans. Unknown to him the

Hawaiians were at this time expecting the annual arrival of their God Lono from the sea. The consequences of this encounter were unforeseeable at the time, but as both groups acted according to their own prior expectations a chain of events was set in motion which eventually led to the ritual murder of Cook at the hands of the Hawaiians. Fortunately none of the researchers were threatened with ritual murder, but their encounters with the museums did challenge their own expectations of museums and those of the museum communities they encountered.

Museum Staff

Many museum staff felt threatened by the project and some compared it to 'big brother'. They expected the project to do one or more of the following:

1. Compare the participating museums in order to rank them competitively
2. Produce an objective account of what is going on in each museum
3. Identify good and bad practice
4. Point the finger at particular individuals

These expectations informed their participation in the project and the way they responded to the researchers, so, although all four researchers found staff welcoming and helpful, in some sense their expectations that museums were closed institutions was confirmed. Since this project has been presented as an access and inclusion project, staff involved in this aspect of museum work, have inadvertently become gatekeepers. The researchers were inevitably drawn into the internal politics of the museums and tended to see things from the point of view of those staff members with whom they have had the most contact, often learning and access or front of house staff. This in itself reveals something about the way the museum communicates both internally and externally.

Researchers

Despite the variation among our researchers in their experience of museums, they all seemed to share some basic expectations of museums

1. Museums are powerful, wealthy and essentially conservative institutions
2. Museum staff are 'experts' or 'academics' whose level of qualification make them identifiably different from 'ordinary people'.

It is interesting that these expectations persist, despite the efforts made by most museums, including all four participating in this project to be more approachable and accessible. Several of the researchers spoke of being afraid of asking questions in museums for fear of appearing stupid. In all four cases the researchers found museum staff to be approachable and friendly and very willing to help and answer their questions. Nevertheless some aspects of the researchers' experiences worked to confirm their expectations, often despite the efforts of the staff.

Researcher A said that when he was a child he was afraid to ask questions in museums in case people thought he was stupid. As an adult he has come to realise that 'no question is stupid'. He has considerable experience of consulting with museums as a member of an ethnically defined community and has even been involved in curating his own exhibitions. He has become very aware of excluding people by assuming that they have the same knowledge as him and expects the same kind of awareness from

museums but feels that he does not always find it. This reveals an ambiguity arising from the different models of what constitutes 'knowledge' being used by both the researcher and the museum staff. As a member of a community being consulted he is regarded as possessing a certain kind of knowledge which is of interest to museum professionals, but he feels his own experience of working with museums is rarely taken seriously. As a visitor he feels excluded from some exhibitions because he doesn't have the kind of academic background available to exhibition designers.

Researcher B had only experienced museums as a casual visitor before. She had the impression that they were wealthy organizations. She felt that staff would be older and that they would be very academic, interested mainly in the collections and not the public. She admitted that she had never had a conversation with anyone who worked in a museum because:

- 1) There is usually no one around
- 2) She didn't know you could
- 3) She was afraid she would be bored.

Before participating in this project B did not feel comfortable approaching museum staff to ask questions, expecting that they would not be interested in talking to her. Early in the project B asked the question 'would it not be easier for museum staff if less rather than more people came in?' Her question reflected the common assumption that museums were about objects rather than people. This perception was frequently challenged as she became aware that museum staff are passionate about the displays they are involved with and see their purpose as engaging with the public. They actively want people to come in and share their interest. Nevertheless, B felt that museum staff are too mysterious and hidden away. They should be made more visible to the public. This point is interesting and it begs the question as to whether at some level our researcher's expectation is shared by museum staff in the sense that they expect members of the public to be interested in the collections rather than in them, thereby projecting the impression that the museum is about objects and people are superfluous.

Researcher C had visited a number of museums and has some experience of museum consultation exercises as a member of an ethnically defined community. She is a young mother, well educated and confident. She found the museum interesting and informative, but in some ways she found the museum difficult to access. The building is large and imposing, and in the galleries and even the café she had the feeling that she had to be quiet. Gallery staff were present, but she felt unsure whether they were the appropriate people to ask questions to or whether they were security guards. When she plucked up the courage to approach they were helpful and informative. As a researcher the staff made her feel very welcome, but they were to be found in the office - behind closed doors. There was no-one to speak to in the public space, she had to press the button outside the door and wait for a response. C described it as being like waiting to see your bank manager.

Researcher D had considerable experience as a museum visitor. She is a mother and when she visited the museum with her family she found it accessible and informative. On entering the museum as a researcher however, she was surprised by the differences in viewpoints and competing agendas among museum staff. Whilst all welcomed her she felt that many were nervous of her presence and some resisted a close involvement with her.

Museum encounters, whether with casual visitors or long term community partners are understood through the prism of the prior understandings of all concerned. By discussing their encounters and experiences with me the researchers were able to reflect upon them in such a way as to highlight this process.

Two Tribes

Most museums now understand themselves as 'forums' rather than 'temples'. In practice, the researchers found that there were disagreements about what this means. Different elements in the museums embraced this idea to different degrees, so that talking to learning and access staff gave the impression that the museum is firmly in the 'museum as forum' camp, when in other respects the institution behaves like a more traditional 'temple of knowledge'. Sometimes the learning and access agenda is left to a few people and seen as 'their thing'. If these individuals are dynamic, their agenda can seem to dominate the public face of the museum, but it is not necessarily shared by all staff. Individuals resist in small ways. Old fashioned and even sexist or racist attitudes can become entrenched under the guise of practical reality and this was presented to the researchers as 'just the way it is'.

In practice this resulted in different interactions with members of staff perceived as 'academic' and 'non academic'. Consciously or unconsciously, both researchers and staff seemed to assume the existence of a hierarchy of knowledge forms which can perhaps be summed up as a perceived difference between 'expert' and 'common sense' knowledge.

Vignette 1: Who's the Expert?

Our researcher becomes very interested in one of the more unusual features of the museum and thereby came to know one of the museum volunteers who had been involved with developing this aspect. This volunteer had taken responsibility for the work and managed to secure funding for the project. However when the project was completed and became an important feature of the museum, a senior and long established member of staff suddenly began to take an interest. This person assumed responsibility for the project, even referring to it as 'my project'. Because of the hierarchical structure of the museum the volunteer felt unable to challenge this and so felt pushed out.

Museums make use of a variety of different forms of expertise, from that of highly trained professionals and academic experts to the specific expertise of passionate volunteers or committed community partners. However what this vignette shows is that certain forms of knowledge may be implicitly valued more highly than others so that the input of the latter becomes invisible and a situation can develop where certain individuals appear to be credited for the work of others.

Throughout the project it was clear that a distinction between 'expert' knowledge and 'common sense' knowledge was reflected in the interactions between museum staff and members of the public as well as between academic staff and gallery assistants/ volunteers.

It could be suggested that this perception results from the researchers' lack of familiarity with academics and their assumptions about the kinds of people academics are, but to dismiss their experience on these grounds fails to take account of the fact that two of the

four researchers had undergraduate degrees and at least two had considerable experience of interacting with academics. In most cases researchers found that once they had spoken to the individuals they were nervous about meeting, they found them approachable and interesting. Often they were pleasantly surprised by these meetings, but there were exceptions. Sometimes researchers encountered people that they perceived to be 'intellectuals who think that they are above you' and in some cases researchers felt belittled or patronized by responses they received to their questions. In more than one case researchers felt that particular members of staff were dismissive of them. For example meetings were arranged and then forgotten.

It is therefore pertinent to ask whether there is anything in the organisational culture of the museum which approximates to this perceived distinction between academic and non academic staff, which the researchers translated through their own experiences and attitudes. All the researchers observed there are divisions within the museums, just as in any institution. These include those between 'front of house' and 'behind the scenes' staff or between 'learning and access' and curatorial staff. In some cases there was a perceivable division between 'insiders', consisting of a core group of museum staff and others who are regularly involved with the museum, and 'outsiders' consisting of newcomers and a wider public.

Our researchers quickly became aware of the inevitable conflicts of interest between preserving and improving the collection and giving people the access or the displays that they wanted. They found for example that some curatorial staff resent the amount of money being spent 'front of house' when their own departments are being cut. One researcher observed that gallery assistants never gather as a group for meetings in the way that the various other teams do. This reinforced the perception that they are menial staff. Space and location can reflect the importance attached to certain groups and activities. Researchers sometimes found that departments whose activities seemed to dominate their experience of the museum, such as 'learning and access' had cramped and restricted office space.

Chiefs, priests and commoners

When 19th century explorers, missionaries and anthropologists wrote about the 'native tribes' they encountered there was a tendency to portray them as an undifferentiated whole who acted and thought in the same way. The reality, however, was far more complex and outsiders were often unwittingly drawn into local politics and power struggles between different interest groups. Captain Cook's involvement with the Hawaiian priests, led him to seriously misunderstand the actions of both the chiefs and the common people, with fatal consequences.

The researchers inevitably encountered divisions and conflicts of interest in the museums which they understood partly through their own sets of assumptions and partly through those of the museum staff with whom they most closely identified. So, for example, many of the conflicts of interests they experienced were understood in terms of the assumptions about 'expert' and 'common sense' knowledge discussed above. These assumptions govern the management of difference within the museum and also affect interactions with visitors and community partners.

Different teams and departments have different visions of the museum and when people are busy with their own tasks it is easy to reach a situation where people in one department don't necessarily know what other departments do. However, even when management encourages communication between teams there can be considerable resistance. Initiatives that take people away from their core responsibilities are often unpopular. This leads to a fracturing of the staff. In some cases it seemed that decisions made in private by some groups affect the practice of others and there is a lack of transparency. Divisions and competing agendas may be inevitable, but the way they are experienced depends on how they are managed and whether there is communication and open discussion between different interest groups.

In some cases senior managers were considered to be out of touch with the day to day situation in the museum, perhaps they were regularly elsewhere, or their office was not located in the museum building. In these situations it is possible that they have a rosy picture of the workings of the museum. There may be a problem with approachability if senior management are hard to get hold of. Individuals who do have the ear of senior management are able to take charge and make decisions in their absence. This can lead to situations in which the *realpolitik* of the office does not reflect the aims of the leadership. Things are done in whispers and there is suspicion about why things happen. When things go wrong different stories and rumours abound, leading to a breakdown of communication and a lack of clarity. Another scenario is one in which there is a 'power behind the throne', perhaps a member of staff who has been there for longer than most. There is a perception that this person or persons have greater influence with management than they should have. The feeling that someone can take the credit for other peoples' achievements is quite widespread.

Even when management and staff work well together, there is a perceived distinction between 'shop floor' and 'academic' staff. One researcher found that the museum has a policy of promoting people because of their experience rather than qualifications but even staff who have made the transition from 'shop floor' to managerial positions talk about this progression as 'moving to the dark side'. There is a feeling among 'shop floor' staff that management needs to have more humility and be prepared to own up to mistakes and put them right.

Converts and Savages

When a new way of thinking is introduced to a community, along with changes in socio-economic conditions, those who embrace it often appear to be more successful than those who resist. 'Converts', whose opinions and actions fit with the new ideas get a positive response from the new powers that be, and so other people adjust their ideas and practices in order to conform. Eventually the new world view comes to seem logical and sensible whilst the old appears irrational and anachronistic. 'Converts' themselves are often the first to condemn the 'savagery' of the old ways.

Vignette 2 - All Views are important, but some are more important than others.

Our researcher attends a meeting at the museum. Having little experience of how museums work, she is surprised by how long it takes to get even the slightest thing done. On this occasion, the big discussion surrounds the display cases in a major gallery popular with school parties. The cases are old-fashioned and, some argue, too high for children to see into. There is a move to replace them. The curator, who has been in post

for many years resists this move. No agreement is reached, but most staff are in favour of the move. As discussion continues after the meeting the curator is portrayed as the old stick who resists change for the sake of it, even when this conflicts with the museum's priorities such as becoming more child friendly. To the researcher this individual's resistance is highlighted as an example of things not working. The curator's position is formally treated with respect, but it is clearly regarded as anomalous and problematic with regard to the general direction of the museum and is even the subject of amusement. Pressure continues to be exerted until eventually the cases are replaced.

The narratives that accompany change in the organisation affect the organisational culture, but how often are they considered from this perspective? The researchers were surprised by the amount of change going on behind the scenes in the museums they visited. Most people seemed very open to this change but it meant that everything was up in the air. Some people resist change, but they are isolated and often become defensive. One researcher encountered a narrative of a sleepy museum, transformed by new staff. However, she found that despite progressive goals, in many ways the museum was quite old-fashioned.

Another spoke of the sense of permanence attached to museums. In her words 'they have always been there and always will be'. Thus the pace of change she encountered was a surprise to her. Changes to galleries were in progress, and the museum was undergoing upheavals in terms of staffing, leadership and direction. Many staff are working on fixed term contracts funded externally this meant that they had to always be on the lookout for other more permanent posts. This generated a sense of being in a state of limbo.

In most of the museums, temporary posts seemed to be concentrated in learning and access. This suggests that in some ways this agenda is still seen as external and temporary. But the Renaissance funded posts could demonstrate the need for this kind of work, if they are successful, then even when the funding runs out the museums might find ways to continue the work. This approach relies heavily on the successes of particular individuals and, perhaps more importantly raises the threat that staff time and resources are re-directed to make up for the loss of temporary posts, away from other activities such as curatorial work. This would exacerbate the divides already discussed.

Cross cultural dialogue

Of course, a museum is not an isolated community, but one which actively seeks dialogue with the 'outside' in a variety of ways. By turning the tables, the Outside In - Inside Out project has made a number of aspects of this process visible.

In all four museums most staff supported outreach initiatives, but were very cautious about what the museum could offer to communities. All four museums prioritised this aspect of their work, but in some cases the researchers felt that this aspect was not taken seriously enough. Consultation was not always representative and it sometimes seemed as if thinking about 'diversity' was just something to be documented, a matter of ticking the right boxes. Others were amazed by the amount of bureaucracy and form-filling that has to happen in order to take a collection out to communities. There is a

perception that community organizations don't understand the need for this process or the amount of work that goes into this kind of thing.

Prioritizing these agendas raises a number of questions. Different publics make different demands. Should the museum also be a community centre, a nursery, a tourist attraction? The museum can't please all of the people all of the time. Often there is a focus on the more excluded sections of society. In some cases there is an attempt to go out to engage with them. In others efforts are concentrated on getting people into the museum rather than on going out to them. This raises questions about who should have access to the museum and how they should behave inside it.

Vignette 3 – This is a museum, not a nursery

The researcher, who is a mother herself encounters a group of children aged 7-10 running through the museum, apparently without adult supervision. When she asks some girls if they like the exhibition they answer that "it's crap!" The researcher asks what they do like about the museum, but they respond that they are "just dossing here" and then run off. The presence of these children in the museum, running around, pulling at each others' clothes and flirting dominates our researcher's visit. Nevertheless our researcher feels more concerned for the children than angry about the disturbance they cause. All around are people with their children, showing them things and explaining, but these children are unsupervised. They have no one to bring the displays to their attention or engage them with the museum, so for them it is just a playing space. Later on she sees a member of museum staff talking to the children, but not in a friendly fashion.

The researcher was surprised that the museum tolerated these children. Their presence raises issues about who the museum is for and how it should be used. Her perception is that traditionally the museum was seen as a place of quiet contemplation. Certainly many staff and visitors would view the children's behaviour as an unwelcome intrusion. On the other hand it could be argued that the museum exists to provide a service for the community. Should this involve providing entertainment as well as knowledge? Perhaps the problem lies in the children's lack of engagement with the museum itself. Their disparaging comments and seeming lack of interest seems to make them 'inappropriate museum users', but is it fair to dismiss them in this way? Would it be more productive for museum staff to interact with them in a more positive way to try to engage them with the museum? Whose responsibility is this? Events which engage young people can be messy and gallery assistants are the ones who have to tidy up. Even when the museum has a policy of not allowing children in unsupervised, in practice the decision is often made by the front desk staff. Some enforce the policy more rigidly than others. This reflects different attitudes to the museum ranging from, 'this is a museum not a nursery' to 'it's our responsibility to be accessible to these children whose parents may never bring them to museums'.

How do museums respond to the expertise of those they consult?

All the researchers came to see their participation in the project as a kind of consultation exercise. They were being asked to give their opinions of the museum, so that museum staff could act to make improvements where necessary. Accordingly they were nervous about whether they were asking the 'right' questions or finding out the 'right' information. In short they were worried that they did not have the expertise to make a formal critique

of the museum, and as a result some were reluctant to offer criticisms. This has important implications for consultation exercises, which tend to target people for a particular kind of experience rather than for their individual expertise. Those who are willing to offer a critique on this basis represent only a small fraction of the community in question. This also raises the issue of payment. One researcher made the point that museums rarely if ever offer payment for the expertise of those they consult. There is an assumption that they will do it for free.

According to the principles of ethnographic research, researchers in this project were not expected to offer criticism direct to the museum during the research, but to act as a detached observer taking notes to be analysed later. Not all researchers, or museum staff, were comfortable with this observer position, however and in practice, some members of staff felt they were being personally criticized and some researchers felt that they were being deflected, or their own expertise not recognized. This raises important questions about the ways in which museums can invite and respond to criticism from diverse publics. Although all four participating museums are making important efforts to listen to criticism and respond to different opinions, outsiders to the museum are not always able to express themselves in ways that are acceptable within the organizational culture and this can be an uncomfortable experience for both staff and members of the public. When criticism is expressed in ways that appear emotional or even irrational from a professional point of view it is tempting to retreat into academic modes of communication and dismiss the criticisms as inappropriate or ill-informed. This can lead to frustration on the part of those consulted and reinforce the impression that museum's attempts to listen are superficial.

One commonly used method of achieving the 'forum' effect is to design exhibitions that leave much of the interpretation up to the public, especially when the topic is a controversial one. Many of the researchers expressed a clear concern about exhibitions that exclude by assuming particular levels of knowledge. Our researchers found exhibitions that lacked explanations too academic. They felt that when objects are displayed without context or explanation and left for the public to interpret there is exclusion because not everyone is equipped to do so. Academics may want to let the public interpret displays themselves, but often the public want explanations but are not necessarily confident about interpreting challenging displays. Two researchers raised the issue of answering their children's questions. If not enough explanatory information is provided with a display or work of art the children may ask questions which their parents are unable to answer. Many parents are uncomfortable with this.

It is possible for individuals to interpret the significance of exhibits in ways radically different from those envisioned by the exhibition design teams. Of course museum professionals are aware of this and exhibitions are often designed with the intention of promoting debate and dialogue, but our researchers' comments suggest that many visitors would feel uncomfortable about expressing their understandings of the exhibits in the museum because of a perceived hierarchy of knowledge in which certain kinds of interpretation are more highly valued. This raises questions of whether a museum's role is to offer some form of 'education'. This was a word frequently used in the museum context, but rarely examined. All four researchers considered museums to be 'educational' in the sense that they provided access to knowledge, and many staff seemed to feel that their role was to inform the public, but what exactly this meant was not always clear.

One researcher was interested in a display of art created by local young people who had been excluded from mainstream education in a project organized by the museum. The work was prominently displayed in the main entrance foyer, but the background to the project wasn't clear. Again, the problem was one of communication. In order to appreciate the art the researcher needed to know more about the circumstances under which it was produced and the museum's role in facilitating this. She felt that the display did not do justice to the significance of this aspect of the museum's work. The theme of communication recurred several times in her comments, she was very pleasantly surprised by the work of the museum and its staff, but felt that she would not have been aware of it had she not been involved in this project because the museum did not communicate its activities well.

Another researcher found the museum interesting and informative, but she also found some displays inaccessible. The local history exhibition was text heavy. In the art gallery she found the opposite, however. The exhibits were just a series of pictures without much interpretation. It seemed that the two exhibitions adopted an opposite approach to the transfer of knowledge in each case, but neither approach seemed to work exactly as intended.

One way of looking at this is in terms of 'hot' and 'cold' forms of knowledge. On this model information provided in the form of texts, such as labels, leaflets or catalogues is seen as 'cold' knowledge. It is the kind of knowledge that the researchers identified as possessed by 'academics' or 'experts'. They regard the acquisition of this kind of knowledge as 'educational', but are often uncomfortable with expressing their own expertise in this way. Knowledge produced in face to face communication, such as in interactions with museum staff or at 'hands on' sessions is 'hot' knowledge and when this kind of knowledge is seen to be valued effective communication seems to occur.

An interesting observation here is that the distinction between 'academics' and 'ordinary people' is overcome by enthusiasm and passion. When experts successfully communicate their passion for their subject, it appears that they transform 'cold knowledge' into 'hot knowledge'.

Vignette 4 – Feeling valued?

Our researcher observes the staging of a new temporary exhibition of work by a local ethnic minority artist. This exhibition is championed by 'access and inclusion' staff and is presented as part of the museum's strategy for widening participation and including multiple voices. It occupies a prominent space but internally this is recognized as being partially down to luck. Our researcher attends a consultation session intended to get feedback from local communities on the exhibition. She/he is told that the session has to be held from 5pm – 7pm because of practical considerations. This time makes it very difficult for working people to attend. As a result the event is poorly attended which reflects badly on those who organized it. Another event, an official opening that seemed to involve elites rather than ordinary people ran from 6.30 to 8pm, showing that holding meetings at a more convenient time is possible.

In reality what museum staff would like to achieve is always subject to practical and political constraints and what is produced is always a compromise, but this situation is exacerbated when competing agendas are not openly discussed. Different agendas take priority in different circumstances, so that what seems to be policy can be over-ridden in

practice. Even an agreed division of labour can appear to outsiders in terms of a hierarchy of knowledge and power

There seems to be a problem when decisions are perceived as being made outside the museum that reflect other agendas. For instance, in some museums, there was a feeling that the museum was sometimes held back by being tied to a local council. When the museum is answerable to the council, staff are required to hold lots of meetings with the council to discuss expectations and events to promote the museum. In theory the council could close the museum if it was felt to be unpopular, but at the same time council decisions such as the decision to close on a day that used to be popular with visitors, or to charge entrance fees are seen to negatively affect the museum's ability to make itself more accessible. In some cases there was a suggestion that to present these decisions as imposed by the council, was a way of deflecting the blame for what is really an unpopular internal management decision.

Often divisions reflect different understandings of the purpose of the museum. Does the museum serve the interests of a local community/ communities, or should it represent the best its location has to offer to the wider world, or serve as a tourist attraction? These agendas affect what is displayed or collected. For instance should the work of local artists take priority over works of national importance? When items are donated locally should they be given display space at the expense of significant acquisitions? Some museums seem more interested in displaying what is nationally or internationally recognized than what is of interest to local communities, in particular ethnic communities. These communities have little access to the decision making process.

Conclusion

This report has raised many questions and provided few if any answers and many of the issues raised will already be familiar to museum staff. All the researchers have stressed to me how much they have enjoyed working with the museums and how much they like the things that are being done there. It is perhaps tempting to dismiss their opinions and criticisms as based on partial or inadequate observations or a lack of familiarity with the constraints under which museums operate. What is interesting, however, is that they have all raised questions that go right to the heart of contemporary museum practice.

- Is there communication and open discussion between different interest groups?
- Do decisions made in private by some groups affect the practice of others?
- Do different agendas take priority in different circumstances, so that what seems to be policy can be over-ridden in practice?

Implications for organisations

Nadine Andrews

This report discusses the implications of the Outside In - Inside Out research for aspects of organisational culture. By offering this comment, it seeks to stimulate serious debate within the museums and action towards addressing issues in order to improve the quality of visitor experience when interacting with the museums.

A definition of organisational culture

Organisation culture is used in this report to mean the dominant attitudes, values, beliefs, assumptions and behaviours that exist within an organisation.

Organisational culture and the visitor

The nature of a visitor's experience is the sum of a whole load of decisions made by the museum together with all the stuff (attitudes, values, expectations, preferences etc) that the visitor brings with them.

Organisational culture influences how and what decisions get made. It influences an organisation's performance and affects its ability to learn.

Organisational values that are espoused but not made operational creates dissonance, which if detected by visitors can affect the way they relate to the museum:

“The hypocrisy involved in espousing values that are not acted upon generates significant distrust”

Dissonance may also be experienced by incongruent messages being given out by different bits of the museum.

There may also be dissonance between the organisational values and the values held by individual members of the public or communities. Relationships work best when there are shared values and expectations.

Perception and reality

Museum staff may disagree with a visitor's perception of their museum; perhaps they regard it as factually incorrect. But to dismiss it as 'wrong' is to miss the point that for the visitor their perception is their reality, and in terms of creating public value and legitimacy that is what matters.

Views are of course subject to change. It therefore becomes incumbent upon the museum to bridge the gap between the museum and visitor perspective, perhaps through a revised communication strategy.

Dimensions of organisational culture

The model below, used to analyse and interpret organisational culture in the Outside In project, is adapted from models developed by Trompenaars Hampden Turner², Bates³, Argyris and Schon⁴, and Handy⁵.

Not all the dimensions were displayed, revealed or otherwise in evidence at each museum during the project.

You may find it useful to think where you would place your organisation on each of the following dimensions.

| Internal communication and decision making | |
|---|---|
| Open communication; easy to interact; personal contact | Closed communication; difficult to interact; impersonal contact (email) |
| Joined up/team | Fractured/individual |
| Learning & access integrated | L&A bolted on |
| Centralised power/gatekeeper | Diffused power & leadership |
| Democratic decision-making | Autocratic decision-making |
| Transparency & clarity of roles | Blurring of roles, lack of clarity |
| Avoidance; unconscious assumptions | Confrontation; self aware |
| High power distance (accept decisions) | Low power distance (ok to challenge decisions) |
| Neutral (don't show emotion) | Affective (ok to show emotion) |
| Low risk/low change | High risk/high change |
| Knowledge value and criticism | |
| Hierarchy of experts | Equality of views between staff & with community |
| Internal validation & legitimacy (peers) | External validation (public) |
| Same (open to criticism in context of sameness) | Difference (open to criticism in context of difference) |
| Attitude to the outside and relationship with public | |
| Open to outside | Closed |
| Role is to inform | Role is to exchange |
| Specific (treat as all different) | Generic (treat as all same) |
| Confidence and certainty | Uncertainty, lack of confidence |
| Deep understanding/commitment to diversity | Shallow understanding/commitment |
| Other aspects of organisational culture | |
| Universalism (stick to the rules) | Particularism (flexible to circumstance) |
| Conflict resolved by negotiation; view colleagues as allies | Conflict resolved by fighting; assertive/aggressive; view colleagues as opponents |
| Loose control structure | Tight control structure |
| Focus on process (safety) | Focus on output/results (take risks) |

It may be evident that some combinations fit more congruently together than others.

Organisational culture is dynamic. However, it is likely that some aspects of organisational culture are more enduring and embedded than other aspects that are more amenable to change.

Archetypical examples and their implications

Presented below are several archetypes of organisational culture.

The examples given are creations – they are derived and constructed from the Outside In - Inside Out research findings but should not be read as factual descriptions of any of the participating museums.

The research findings were informed by data from a number of sources and multiple perspectives:

1. The community researchers' interpretation of their experience
2. My interpretation of the researchers' experiences
3. My observation of museum interaction with the researchers
4. My observations of museums' responses to the researchers, the project as a whole and to the films at the Outside In - Inside Out workshop 9th June 08
5. The workshop facilitators' interpretations of the museums responses to the project as a whole and to the films at the Outside In - Inside Out workshop on 9th June 2008

Although the researchers did not spend a lot of time in the museums, it should be remembered that valuable insights can be gained from just a few moments of experience. It should also be remembered that the researchers spent more time observing the workings of the museums than is possible for any casual visitor.

THE DEAF EXTROVERT

This museum espouses values of openness, accessibility and public engagement. It aims to be a site of exchange and seeks to engage with critical issues. There is some evidence that these values are not just espoused but also operational. It's an exciting place to work because it does take risks, testing new ways of working and pushing boundaries.

Its sources of validation are both internal (from peers) and external (from the public).

However, there is some incongruity: the museum though open in many ways also displays closed behaviour that has the potential to have significant impact on people it interacts with.

The main problem is that the museum rejects knowledge when it comes in a form that it does not recognise as valid. It works (perhaps unconsciously) with a model of a hierarchy of expert knowledge with scientific rationalism at the top.

Not only does this allow it to dismiss responses that do not sit in this category, it also means it acts as though it were rational and objective and so is uncomfortable with the showing of strong emotions, interpreting them as aggressive or inappropriate.

The paradox is that putting itself 'out there' exposes the museum to uncertainty and unpredictability. It counters this by seeking safety in the institution.

Implications

To engage with the public means to engage with diversity and that requires accepting and valuing difference.

A museum that takes risks and makes attempts to be open and yet does not always listen puts itself very publicly in the firing line of accusations of tokenism and elitism. Ironically more so than a museum that does not take many risks in venturing out and interacting with the public.

THE FEARFUL WHISPERER

Internal communication in this museum is quite closed and it is difficult for staff to interact with each other. There is an over-reliance on email, which makes the contact between staff impersonal.

This closed nature is the reason why the museum is so fractured, with departments not working as joined up as they could be. Learning and Access, for example, is not yet fully integrated into the core of the organisation.

The decision-making processes are blurry. There is a self-appointed gatekeeper to a centralised power base. There is a lack of clarity about roles and decision-making appears to be undemocratic. This creates distrust.

It is very cautious and has an attitude of low risk and low change.

It tends more towards the role of informing than exchanging, and values internal recognition (its position within the sector) as more important than external public validation.

It too operates with a model of a hierarchy of experts; it does not value the knowledge of all staff equally.

This museum is not very self-aware, it does not test its assumptions – often it is not even consciously aware of them. This leads it to have incongruent approaches, for example in its approach to marketing to the public: it treats them both as all the same (one size fits all) and as all different (each market segment has its own interests, needs and preferences).

Implications

The implications here relate to feelings of confusion, miscommunication, suspicion and resentment due to unclear and undemocratic decision-making processes. Simply put, people don't know what's going on. When challenged they initially react defensively because without strong trust between them it is not safe to talk openly and honestly exposing the dysfunctional inner workings of the museum.

The absence of shared understanding of diversity leads to mixed messages and inconsistent programming. This does not inspire confidence in the public that this type of museum is committed and sincere.

THE UNCERTAIN CHECKER

The departments of this museum are more joined up and there is lots of open communication going on as each part seeks to check with every other part about

proposed activity to make sure everyone can participate in decision-making. There is a lot of passion for the work here.

The museum is cautiously moving forward with some parts perceived as less progressive than others.

In some ways it feels inferior to its peers (although it would never admit this out loud). It deals with this by withdrawing and going it alone. Consequently it is more concerned with getting validation externally from its public than internally from its peers.

This also leads it to behave at times in an arrogant manner and at other times it lacks confidence in its own actions.

Implications

This democratic form of decision-making means there are lots of meetings and things can take a long time to get moving. This slowness may mean that it struggles to keep up with the fast-changing world around it.

Passion taken too far can make it too precious as an expert, not acknowledging the value of other's knowledge and opinions.

THE UNFOCUSSED DEFENDER

This museum is fractured, with departments not as joined up as they could be. They get on with doing their own thing. Despite this they present a united front to the world. Power is centralised with an unofficial deputy who is generally acknowledged as the real ruler in this museum.

It is very cautious, takes few risks and is slow to change. It can come across as defensive and closed to the outside world.

It is task oriented and not very self-aware. It is not a place of reflection.

It too operates with a hierarchy of knowledge value.

It seeks validation both externally from its public and internally from its peers in the sector. It feels it has to keep up with its stronger peers and doesn't have the confidence to say no to things.

Implications

The weak vision means things are not contained: they can easily run away with themselves in different directions.

There is nothing that can pull the various parts together into a common ground where there is a shared vision.

¹ S Denning, *The Leader's Guide to Storytelling*, 2005

² F Trompenaars & C Hampden-Turner, *Riding the Waves of Culture*, 1997

³ P Bate, *The Impact of Organizational culture on approaches to organizational problem solving*, *Organization Studies* vol. 5 no. 2 pp 43-66, 1984

⁴ C Argyris & DA Schon, *Organizational Learning: A Theory of Action Perspective*, 1978

⁵ C Handy, *Understanding Organizations*, 1985

What next?

Myna Trustram

This research is taking place at a time when many museums are fundamentally reviewing their purpose and their practice. Political, intellectual and moral imperatives require museums to question their historic role as keepers of uncontested knowledge. Museums in the NW Hub are opening their doors to people who hitherto thought that museums were not for them.

Whilst this move towards more democratic museums is by and large welcomed, it is not an easy transition. As Ian Fairweather shows, *Outside In – Inside Out* has required staff, volunteers and researchers to address the assumptions we bring to our encounter with each other. In this respect the project is not simply about the physical presence of 'outsiders' in the museum. It is also about the internal assumptions of everyone involved being turned inside out and so made visible.

It is this visibility of internal thoughts and feelings (even if only to ourselves) which makes this work difficult. Without this visibility it is hard to know exactly what the problem is and so move forward. We tend to approach issues of equality through writing policies and plans. *Outside In – Inside Out* has taken a different approach and actually required museum staff to engage with the people who normally remain a 'target' on a page.

Ian Fairweather ends his account (page 15) with three questions about communication and decision making in museums. Similarly, Nadine Andrews (page 17) invites you to consider where you would place your museum on a spectrum of issues to do with organisational culture. Underlying all these issues are questions about inclusion and exclusion which apply to both staff and the volunteers.

We are suggesting that what happens next is both reflection and action: reflection on the questions raised followed up by action. For those people reading this who work in museums in the North West of England the Renaissance team is available to help with facilitation or to develop an approach with you that you deliver. We look forward to continuing to work with you on these important issues.

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