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Distance learning for people with disabilities

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Introduction

Museum sites have redefined their role by highlighting their educational capabilities as non-formal cultural learning spaces. It is worth mentioning that the process of learning within museums is not always intentional but results from specific interpretative interventions of the visitor, which are based on experience (Hooper-Greenhil, 2006: 242 -243). In the light of the above, it is of great interest to investigate whether these opportunities are offered by museums to all people or whether they serve some selective function, as well as show the access of those with disabilities to the museum environment can be enhanced through the use of new technologies.

Social exclusion in cultural/museum environments

In the past, museums have contributed to a deliberate process of restricting social groups with specific characteristics, thus enhancing prejudice against them. One of these groups included the disabled. The starting point of our research into the access of this social group to cultural organizations, such as museums, is the view that learning is a social good to which all population groups, regardless of gender, economic situation, social stratification, origin or physical abilities should have access.

The concept of 'democratization of culture' is precisely linked to the provision of access to cultural resources to a wider span of social groups and specifically those

groups excluded from the public sphere (Reeve & Wollard, 2006). From this point of view, the achievement of the physical, intellectual/spiritual as well as emotional presence and participation of each visitor in the museum on equal terms is a matter of human rights. In this sense, the inclusive museum aims at the democratization of the museum experience, promoting strategies of equal cultural access (Sandell, 1998: 407-410).

In such a context, the learning experience acquired in the museum can be seen as a cultural achievement against social exclusion and social discrimination (Gibbs et al., 2007: 84).

Therefore, in order to meet the demands of social inclusion of people with disabilities, museums must remove the natural and socio-cultural barriers and their stigmatization factors, such as the lack of adequate facilities. They must also ensure the effective participation of those with disabilities with the exhibits/objects on the interfaces by using digital technologies.

Digital interaction of people with disabilities in the MoE/XENISEUM

In this regard, we will focus on people with sensory difficulties, particularly those with partial or total loss of vision. It is a group that is often considered marginalized in terms of its position and role within museums. However, this does not arise because of their sensory difficulty, but is due to the design of museum exhibitions. Anything not taken in by the eyes is considered unsuitable for a museum (Candlin, 2003: 101).

Sensory and intellectual access to the museum is facilitated through the use of digital media. It becomes accessible to the visually impaired and those with learning difficulties through the provision of alternative interpretative means.

As part of the "Research - Create - Innovate"¹ Program, a special website has been designed through which all the deliverables of the Project are presented with visual facilities. Users have the ability to navigate the Digital Museum of Education using ancillary communication systems. In particular, WCAG 2.0 will be used, which

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is based on: a) 'perception' (the interface is presented in a perceptible way); (b) 'functionality' (the interface system is functional); (c) 'stability' (the same results are achieved in a different way for all users).

This model will be designed to work not only on a personal computer but also to respond (Responsive Design) on mobile devices (smartphones, tablets).

Additional features are supported in terms of text reading, the size of the letters and colors that work as promoters of the digital museum experience.

Through the development of the accessibility bar, navigation is facilitated by appropriate technologies such as acoustic reading, color contrast of texts, font enlargement, text point markings, as well as understanding of the structure of the website (interface).

Conclusion

The above-mentioned technological tools, as summarized, belonging to the visitor-centered view of the museum and modern museology/museum education, can contribute to the active, interactive and empowering participation of individuals with disabilities in the museum learning/experience, provided that the following conditions apply. Firstly, the museum exhibition should represent the very existence of these individuals through the exhibits/objects and cause them to retrieve their experiences, regenerate them and reconstruct their life narratives (Dodd, et al., 2008). Secondly, individuals with disabilities are treated as people who already have experiences or as people who know. Consequently, it is not enough to treat individuals with disabilities as a "special" audience, as opposed to "normal" visitors. This means that the visiting or participatory museum recognizes that the physical barriers of individuals are not the result of disability but they rather arise from society (social model) and should, therefore, be removed.

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