An empathetic study on young people and museums in Luxembourg

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Photograph of a focus-group. Reproduced with kind permission of the youth club. (Because of the confidentiality of the research, the photographer remains anonymous.)

Museums are increasingly trying to engage with various audiences in different ways. Applying their endeavours to young people is often especially challenging. Young people, or teenagers, often seem distant and ‘hard to reach’ – an issue that was first observed several decades ago and has been investigated ever since. Apart from attendance issues, the question of young people and museums also brings to the
fore several challenges that are specific to this age group: indeed, young people are often perceived as an undifferentiated group by adults. They are also particularly prone to being stereotyped, with public opinion often holding unfounded assumptions about their lack of interest, especially in cultural activities.

My interest in power issues in museums and social justice brought me to explore the relationship between young people and museums. My PhD research at the University of Leicester seeks to find out how young people perceive, understand and experience museums and if there is a place for museums in young people’s lives. It also explores how power, representation and access affect that relationship.

**The research: aims, methods and place**

For my study, I conducted focus groups in five different youth clubs in my home country: Luxembourg. There were three reasons for this. Firstly, I wanted to meet young people on their own terms, outside the museum and in their own places. Youth clubs offer a safe and familiar environment, where young people attend out of choice. Hence, they provided a space where participants felt more at ease and more empowered than they would have done in a museum or school context, where adults would have had authority over them. The venues also allowed me to reach visitors and ‘non-visitors’ alike.

Secondly, Luxembourg provided the ideal context to explore the views of young people from a variety of socio-economic, educational, cultural and linguistic backgrounds. With almost 50 per cent of its population of 600,000 being non-nationals, Luxembourg has by far the highest proportion of foreign citizens in the European Union. In the capital, Luxembourg City, the ratio is even higher, with 70 per cent of citizens being non-nationals. In addition, around 180,000 cross-border commuters come to work in the country every day. Luxembourg is also a multilingual country. It has three official languages (Luxembourgish, French and German) and many other languages that are spoken in daily life.

Thirdly, I chose to conduct focus groups as they enabled me, in a relatively short time (usually between one and two hours), to gather a wide range of perceptions and experiences. More importantly, the interaction between the focus-group participants
allowed for an exchange of different opinions and views. For the sessions, I prepared questions and sub-questions with the following emphases:

- past experiences and the image of museums;
- ‘think back’ questions;
- ‘thinking’ and ‘feeling’ questions;
- the museum of the future; and
- a museum for young people.

Although the questions served as a guide to the subjects we would cover, I tried not to control the flow of the discussion excessively. Focus groups are ‘social experiences’, and the discussions resemble conversations rather than interviews (Krueger and Casey 2015:41). The ‘association of ideas’ from various participants often resulted in the discussion taking an unexpected turn or revealing new topic areas (Acocella 2012:1132). In addition, I printed out some large photographs of various aspects of local and international museums; for example, architecture, displays, learning activities and events. Photo-elicitation was useful for triggering memories, giving new impetus and direction to discussions, and encouraging the exchange of divergent views (see Pink 2015).

From the outset, I was prepared to spend time finding youth clubs that were willing to participate in my study. A first open call, sent by email to all the youth-club leaders in Luxembourg, did not generate any replies. However, a presentation of my project at a local meeting of youth-club leaders did result in one collaboration. Over the weeks that followed, I was able to secure access to other youth clubs by making phone calls and visiting them in person. I learned that the gatekeepers were the key: when leaders were interested in participating in my project, we had no difficulty in organising the sessions. The support and kindness of the youth workers proved to be invaluable. They took up the task of finding, among their members, young people who were interested in talking about museums and making their voices heard. Among other things, they assisted during the sessions (an ethical requirement because of the research on minors) and helped to collect consent forms from parents. Some of the youth workers also offered their time for an interview; this allowed me to collect background information about youth clubs in Luxembourg and
explore youth workers' opinions on some of the issues that were discussed during the focus groups.

An empathetic approach

For this project, it was important to conduct not only an ethical but also an empathetic study. Research on people’s opinions and experiences, especially a qualitative study of ‘vulnerable’ people (such as children and teenagers), requires a high level of empathy from the researcher. To begin with, I went to the youth clubs – places I was not familiar with. I am neither a youth worker nor used to working with young people. This was a novel experience and, as I discovered, a humbling and illuminating one. The effort it took me to enter a place that I was not familiar with was very akin to the threshold fears that many young people experience when visiting museums. In her book *The Art of Relevance*, Nina Simon (2016) describes how you can understand what it feels like to be an outsider in a museum only if you have gone to a place that you yourself do not feel comfortable in.

The willingness to listen empathetically was also crucial during the focus groups. As a moderator, your role is to lead the conversation (for example, on the topics that need to be covered) and encourage interaction between the participants. It is important to respect and understand, not to judge and criticise. Above everything else, listening is key to understanding participants’ views and being responsive to their comments. ‘Active listening’, a term that was coined by the psychologists Carl Rogers and Richard Farson in the 1950s, offers an empathetic and sensitive way of engaging with people:

> By consistently listening to a speaker you are conveying the idea that ‘I’m interested in you as a person, and I think that what you feel is important. I respect your thoughts […] I feel sure that you have a contribution to make. I’m not trying to change or evaluate you. I just want to understand you. I think you’re worth listening to […]’ (2015:11).

Active listening also implies a willingness to see ‘the world from the speaker’s point of view’ (2015:16). Finally, for Rogers and Farson, a message conveys meaning
through both content and feeling, which means that as an active listener you also need to pay attention to non-verbal communication.

A case in point: young people's views on activism in museums

By opting for a purely qualitative study, locating it in Luxembourg and using a flexible method, I was able to collect rich data. The participants' views and descriptions generated insights into a number of issues that had not been investigated in detail before or had not been explored at all. Through comparisons with previous research, they also helped to uncover questions that will require attention from museums in the future. Participants' views on activism in museums offer a telling example.

One of the questions I asked the focus-group participants was which topics they thought young people would like to see museums address. The question generated a vast and diverse array of answers. One group of topics centred on collective and global issues, rather than individual and personal interests. The word cloud\(^1\) below shows the subjects that participants raised.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{word_cloud.png}
\caption{Which topics do you think young people would find interesting in museums? (Partial answers)}
\end{figure}

\(^1\) In word clouds, the size of a word represents the frequency of the word being mentioned.
Drugs were mentioned most frequently, and many participants thought it would be interesting to learn more about their history, uses and effects. Some of the topics – such as nuclear power, war and cancer – were said to be ‘worrying’, while others – such as homophobia, racism and AIDS – were referred to as needing increased public awareness. What all these topics have in common, according to the participants, is that by raising them, museums could contribute to informing people (and not only young people) and creating a better and fairer society. The participants often had lively and passionate discussions about the issues and how museums could address them. For example, some participants thought that museums should ‘shake people up’, while stressing that this should be done in a respectful manner without hurting people’s feelings. Many participants saw museums as potential places for providing information and for activist practice; for example, by provoking visitors to think about contemporary issues and, possibly, to change their attitudes.

However, the discussions around the topics did not just highlight potential topics of interest for young people in museums. They also drew attention to how society makes assumptions about young people: notably about their interest – or supposed lack of interest – in politics. The following extract offers a glimpse of the discussions between participants in the focus groups:

Laurence: [resuming a previous conversation]: What other contemporary topics would you find interesting?

Emma: Refugees. At school, we created an exhibition about refugees. I have to say that there were many people at the vernissage and also many young people. […] Our aim was to make people think about the issue and I found that it was really successful. I think [in museums] there should be more about the things we hear in the news. […] And the refugee crisis, that’s something that concerns us all.

[…]

Laurence: What other topics would be interesting to young people?

Nick: Politics. Ah, you mean for young people? No, not politics then.

Laurence: You don’t think so?

Nick: No! No, there aren’t many young people who are interested in that. Okay, it’s a pity…

Laurence: But refugees, that’s politics too, isn’t it?
Emma: Yes, and I think that refugees will be a thing for a very long time.

Nick: Yes, yes. But young people, they simply aren’t interested in politics. That’s just the way it is.

Although some participants, such as Nick, argued that that young people are not interested in politics, the extract shows that they can be – even if they do not use the word ‘politics’. Assumptions about young people’s political disengagement are heavily grounded on an ill-founded public perception of an apolitical and apathetic youth, which emerged during the 1990s and has been perpetuated by the media, politics and even academia ever since (Pickard and Bessant 2018). However, there are many ways in which young people around the globe are engaging with politics in creative and innovative ways (Pickard and Bessant 2018).

The crucial issue lies in how different people – not just young people – interpret and define such terms as ‘politics’. Returning to participants’ views on activist museum practices, the focus groups raised questions about how opinions on political and controversial topics in museums may differ between young people and the so-called general population. Some studies have suggested that adults prefer museums to present facts in a way that enables them to make up their own mind rather than dictating the museum’s views or being actively political and polemical (Kelly 2006, BritainThinks 2013). A recent online survey (MuseumNext 2017), however, points to possible differences between younger and older adults. The results showed that people under the age of 30 were more likely than older people to support the idea of museums taking a stand on social issues.

It is important to bear in mind that the results of all these studies – including my own – have inevitably been shaped by how respondents interpreted certain words, such as ‘debate’, ‘challenge’ and ‘politics’. Other factors may include their familiarity with museums and their social, cultural and educational backgrounds. To develop a full picture of the possible age-related differences, further studies need to consider a broad range of factors – not least, the way in which participants understand the terms being explored.

With the current level of knowledge, an explanation for possible age-related differences can only be speculative. Explanations may, for example, reside in how different age groups are affected by the social and political climate they have
experienced. Pickard and Bessant (2018:5) point out that the most vulnerable segments of the population, such as ‘the young, the aged and the poor’, are the most affected by local, national and global crises (for example, austerity, recession, unemployment, climate change, racism and extremism). The situatedness of young people in particular social, economic and political contexts, and their resulting outlook on the future, may offer explanations for any age-related differences that are proven to exist.

For the focus-group participants, their everyday experiences in multicultural Luxembourg may have heavily influenced their concerns. This may explain why certain topics, such as racism and the desire for tolerance, prevailed over other contemporary topics of concern, such as climate change. It is also worth remembering that young people are individuals, with different interests, identities and backgrounds. All these factors influence how they experience the place where they live and, ultimately, what place the museum occupies in this context.

Some concluding thoughts

This study has deepened the understanding of various issues underlying the relationship between young people and museums, and it has shed light on new ones. The example of activism in museums illustrates how qualitative research can both inform museum practice and contribute to raising awareness of how society – and museums – perceives certain groups of people. When we talk of different audiences, we often forget that we are talking about individuals who have different interests and needs, even if they share some demographic characteristics. In the case of young people, their opinions, attitudes and experiences of museums are influenced by several factors, of which age is just one.

This research has also had a profound personal impact. Engaging with people outside the realm of academia and museums has been inspiring, humbling and instructive in many ways. The experience in youth clubs has taught me a lot about the value of listening and of empathy – in research, museums and everyday life. And it has demonstrated that often, it is museums that seem hard to reach.
References


Suggestions for further reading: research on young people and museums


