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Curiosity Beyond the Classroom: Education Programming at the Grand Rapids Public Museum

By Sara Forman

November 17, 2016

For my honors thesis, I created and implemented an education program called “Cultural Waters” for the Grand Rapids Public Museum (GRPM) in accordance with their 2016 travelling exhibit *Whales: Giants of the Deep*. The purpose of the education program is to understand the

fundamental structures which shape a culture and the use of symbols in cultures through the comparison between the indigenous cultures of the Maori people of New Zealand and the Anishinabek people in West Michigan. The development and completion of the program was made during a summer 2016 internship at the GRPM, and successfully defended in the fall of 2016. The process of developing the program spanned several months, beginning with research of the initial exhibits used within the program to the actual instruction of the program. Creating and implementing an educational program provided me a creative and challenging educational platform to best use the knowledge and skills I have developed in my undergraduate, and further establish myself as a capable educator.

My initial introduction to education programming in a museum setting began when I started volunteering at the Grand Rapids Public Museum as an education docent. Beforehand I had not been aware of this genre of educational instruction, and I was immediately energized by the concept. The museum implements several Common Core Standards-based programs which are offered to school groups visiting the museum. From my volunteer experience, I understood education programming in a museum setting to be a valuable resource for the typical classroom-based teacher and learner. By counteracting the notion of museums as field trips with little correlation to the classroom, education programming proves museums as educational spaces which can help students meet the same standards as required in classroom environments. Just as classrooms in the hands of effective teachers are productive spaces for student engagement motivation, museums are equally conducive environments for authentic learning.

The summer internship at the GRPM became the ideal place to prove museums as an authentic educational space. Interning at the museum offered a purposeful space for me to use my pedagogical knowledge in a creative manner while also being mentored by the expertise of

several educators. The initial expectations for the internship focussed on developing a PreK and middle school education program related to the travelling exhibit *Whales: Giants of the Deep*. I also interacted with patrons in weekly education events in the museum, as well as assisted and instructed summer camps. During the summer internship, I developed both a K-3 program titled “Do Whales Have Scales?” and a upper-elementary to middle school program titled “Cultural Waters” and resource guides for educators for each. Between the programs and resource guides, I chose to use the latter program for my thesis as the program suited a secondary education audience, which in turn suits my degree.

The program required research on the content of both Maori and Anishinabek cultures, and specifically how each culture is represented in each exhibit. I relied heavily on the permanent exhibit, “The Anishinabek: The People of This Place” and “Grand Fish, Grand River” to identify key ideas from the Anishinabek culture in which to include in the program. The exhibit, “The Anishinabek: People of This Place” allows visitors to explore the culture of the Anishinabek Native American people of West Michigan through artifacts, film, and a replica longhouse which guests can enter. The exhibit separates Anishinabek culture in two contexts: pre-contact with Europeans and post-contact with Europeans. The exhibit provides numerous opportunities for exploration and student analysis, and it was decided the main Anishinabek exhibit would be central to the “Cultural Waters” program. The “Grand Fish, Grand River” exhibit focuses on the prevalence of the Lake Sturgeon in Anishinabek culture as well as the fish’s importance to the Western Michigan ecosystem. Artifacts and text materials are carefully placed, and promote in depth analysis of the cultural and biological ties Anishinabek culture has to the region. This exhibit centered around the critical thinking aspects of the program, verifying student understanding for a complex representation of culture. With the material and content

from these exhibits, I was able to include rich and diverse details in my program about the indigenous people of the West Michigan area.

For the portion of the program about Maori culture, research for this aspect of the program was less hands-on as the exhibit did not arrive at the museum until after the internship. Alternatively, I conducted research through the educational materials and program guides through the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa in Wellington, New Zealand. The resources through the Museum of New Zealand included photographs of the travelling exhibit as well as the text material and photographs of each artifact. The majority of research I conducted on Maori culture I completed through these resource guides. Using my research for the Anishinabek people and the Maori people, I began to develop the objectives and goals for the program in terms of what content students should gain through the program.

The “Cultural Waters” program went through three drafting processes. First, the education team and myself held a meeting to brainstorm ideas for the program. In this meeting we discussed the concept map activity students would complete throughout the program, the pacing throughout the program and specifically the amount of time spent in each exhibit, and what materials would be needed for the program. In this first meeting we decided upon the objectives of the program, the time schedule, and the general direction it would take. For the majority of the brainstorming I did throughout the first draft stage, my supervisor Rob assisted the most with suggestions and offering advice.

The second stage for developing the program included a full walk-through with the education team. Once I had a full working script and educator resource guide for the program, the education team and I previewed the exhibits the program visits, the content covered, and the activities implemented at each point of the program. The team included Rob Schuitema, the

director of education, Mike Posthumous, the vice president of education, and Stephanie Ogren, the science educator for the GRPM. While going through the program, the education team made sure to “pause” the program when they either had a question or suggestion for improvement. The central critique I had in this walk through included the types of questions asked in the program. Many questions I included in the program at that point could be answered with “yes” or “no” responses, limiting student engagement with the content and lacking depth in analysis. From this drafting phase, the content which was introduced remained the same, but I had to further develop a way to scaffold the program so students could develop meaningful connections to the overall objectives by the program’s conclusion.

The third portion of the drafting process involved Dr. Bentz reviewing the program in relation to the Common Core State Standards. I sent the program script and the educator resources to Dr. Bentz after I had made revisions according to the walk-through with the education team. The advice from Dr. Bentz focused on how I could include checkpoints for formative assessment throughout the program. From Dr. Bentz’s review, the program lacked formative questions to check for student understanding in between transitions from one exhibit to the next along with questions to assess understanding at the end of the program. Using the advice and expertise of the education team and Dr. Bentz, I was able to produce a well-organized and compelling education program.

The final test for the “Cultural Waters” program was to fully implement the program with students. Teaching the program myself seemed to be the most authentic method to defend my project. From my previous experience teaching summer programs at the GRPM, I felt confident teaching in this unique learning environment and capable in teaching the program’s content. The student group who participated in the defence of the education program included fifteen 6th

grade students from the Grands Rapids Museum School. This group of students exclusively attends school inside the GRPM itself and were familiar with learning with a museum environment. Since the students I lead in the program were comfortable with the exhibits acting as their classroom, I feel my instruction of the program became more effective.

The defense of the program proved to be effective based upon how students met the outlined objectives of the program and their ability to interact and connect with the overarching concepts. Students responded well to the essential questions outlined in the beginning portion of the program, engaging in discussion easily and showed an eagerness to explore their own understanding of culture. The main questions we focused on were “How do you define culture?” and “How does something become part of a culture?” Students were excited to share their ideas about culture, but initially struggled with the notion of how cultures are developed. I used student definitions and initial ideas about the concept of culture to transition to the concept map activity.

The concept maps were used as the overall activity for students to organize their understanding of Anishinabek and Maori cultures in order to analyze the similar structures these cultures were shaped within. Throughout the program, students completed two concept maps and one Venn diagram. For the first concept map, I modeled for students how to properly complete the activity. The expectation for the activity was for students to be able to explain their reasoning behind their answers. After providing an example, students worked in partners to complete the rest of the concept map. Once student groups finished, we discussed as a group their answers and their reasoning behind them. I was impressed by the discussion and the strength in the arguments to support their answers. For the majority of the program I was able to direct my instruction based upon the script, but we had to rearrange the structure of the program because of a

scheduling conflict. Instead of transitioning from the “Anishinabek” exhibit to the “Grand Fish, Grand River” exhibit, our group had to instead jump ahead to explore the “Whales: Giants of the Deep” exhibit then end the program in the “Grand Fish, Grand River” exhibit. Student performance wasn’t significantly affected by the shift in the program, and we were able to get through all the material.

In essence, the students engaged well with the program and I believe gained a better understanding of how cultures are shaped through the comparison between Anishinabek and Maori cultures. Students were able to practice skills in analyzing artifacts and recognizing their significance according to larger concepts of cultural structures. From the formative assessment questions at the end of the program- addressing again how students define culture after the program-students also showed they had a good grasp on the overall objectives of the program based upon their verbal responses. An additional benefit students gained from the activity is the students who participated in the program when I instructed will later teach their peers the same program.

Even as the majority of the education program was a success, I recognize additional improvements could be made in how I can keep all students on task and engaged with the activities. Out of the fifteen students participating, there were two or three students who had a difficult time initially engaging with the concept maps even when paired with a partner who was interested in the activity. The students who did not focus well on the activities tended to get caught up in exploring the exhibit space and not remaining on task. It was difficult for me to maintain student engagement in the exhibit space as the partner groups were spread out all throughout the exhibit. In retrospect, I would not only recognize early on which students will struggle to stay on task with activities, but also make sure to check in on their progress to make

sure they understand the assignment and focus on completing the task at hand. Even in a regular classroom space this lack of focus on the student's part can be difficult for teachers, but keeping students engaged with the activities in the museum space is even more challenging.

Throughout this process of developing and implementing the "Cultural Waters" program, my experience in creating an inquiry-driven program provided an array of benefits. Developing this program gave me a greater insight on how to create purposeful but also engaging lesson plans by including resources and guiding questions which encourage in-depth learning. This type of authentic lesson-planning showed me a way to hybridize the lesson-planning skills I have developed and use them to structure a learning environment in a museum setting. The chance to directly teach the program itself allowed me to fully experience and reflect on the full process of developing this ninety minute lesson, both considering which aspects transferred well and which needed to be adapted. My abilities in lesson-planning therefore were modified and honed throughout the program and will translate well into a classroom setting. From this experience, I am better equipped to plan purpose-driven lessons and units, include content-relevant resources, as well as generate skills-building activities and above all center learning around student understanding in my own classroom. The program also connected me with many great professional resources through the education staff and curators at the GRPM. The expertise and knowledge the educators I worked with shared was valuable and meaningful, and I am certain to seek their guidance further on in my career. The benefit I personally felt to the greatest extent was an increased passion to encourage the use of institutions such as museums as authentic learning environments to engage secondary education students. While bringing a group of students to a local museum is not always feasible, shifting the perspective of institutions from solely being resources to voluminous environments for authentic learning-- especially in the

form of educational programming-- can further the mindset of educators and students alike on the value to stimulate learning outside of the classroom.