

The Effects of Collaborative Creativity in Children's Museums: Participatory Education at the Roald Dahl Museum

Roald Dahl – spy, fighter pilot, and author, is one of the most memorable and important creators in children's literature. His stories and characters touch the lives of many children, and continue to be staples in households across the world. His legacy lives on in the Roald Dahl Museum. The museum is centred in the United Kingdom and features exhibits from some of Dahl's most famous works (Roald Dahl Museum and Story Centre). With the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Roald Dahl museum quickly shifted to an online experience – or so it tried. The website, roalddahl.com/museum, features a virtual walk through courtesy of Google Maps, and “Museum at Home,” which allows online visitors to create artwork based on the stories of Roald Dahl (Roald Dahl Museum and Story Centre). The museum's online presence also features a section called “Make Stories” – a challenge that compiles tips and videos about Dahl's writing style. The museum encourages children to take these tips and share them on social media with #MakeStoriesLikeRoaldDahl (Roald Dahl Museum and Story Centre). While there was effort on the part of the museum to create activities for children at home, there is a failed connection between the exhibits, the demand, and the product. The museum puts the onus on the children and their caregivers to lead, complete, and share the activities.

This paper will propose an expansion on the website for an online forum designed to engage young visitors for creativity and educational purposes. This forum will draw on the activities presented in the Museum at Home, as well as place heavy emphasis on the Make Stories exhibit. Research shows that creativity between children and their peers enhances knowledge and personal growth in a way that child-adult interaction does not (Cassell and Ryokai 170). This paper will further look at the ways the online forum – henceforth referred to as

the At Home Writing Hut – will engage children in a creative way to further their education and interpersonal skills.

The Roald Dahl Museum already features what Nina Simon calls “participatory projects,” where “the institution supports multi-dimensional content experiences. The institution serves as a “platform” that connects different users, consumers, critics, and collaborators” (Simon). The Museum at Home and Make Stories exhibits both provide participatory opportunities. By definition, these projects are put in place to connect the museum with visitors, specifically children. These creative activities invite children to create a chocolate wrapper ball, a Wonka factory machine, and a button for the glass elevator (Roald Dahl Museum and Story Centre).

At first glance, these activities seem like great participatory projects. By their names alone, website visitors get a sense that they will be engaged in creating a craft based on different stories Dahl has published. At its core, this is what the project is. Website visitors are given an overview of each activity that ties into Dahl’s creative process. Which The project instigates visitors to create something, “just like Roald Dahl” (Roald Dahl Museum and Story Centre). The final steps of the activities are where the participatory project falls flat. The project invites visitors to either visit the museum in person or have a “grown-up” share a photo of the activity on social media (Roald Dahl Museum and Story Centre). While this step of the project is currently impossible – the museum is still closed to visitors due to the on-going pandemic – it also completely removes the children from the project. For continuation of the project, an adult caregiver must step in to either plan a trip to the museum, or share the photo on social media. The child no longer has agency over their art, their caregiver does.

Chelsea Snyder, in their article on writing workshops with children, describes agency as, “the perception one has of his or her capabilities” (406). Taking away agency from children and

their art is damaging to the way they view themselves and their work. There is also no space for the participants to describe how the project made them feel, so evaluators are unable to see the effects of this lack of agency on the children. Simon emphasises that in order for a participatory project to be successful, museums must, “design experiences that invite ongoing audience participation sustainably” (Simon). Unfortunately, the Museum at Home participatory projects are not sustainable, and are therefore unsuccessful. The project is started by the child visitor, only to be presumably finished by an adult. So, while the project itself might be sustainable in theory, the audience is unable to sustain it themselves – creating a failure in its outcomes.

The museum presents a second participatory project on their website called, “Make Stories.” The Make Stories exhibit invites visitors to, “learn about Roald’s writing tricks and creative techniques, find out some fascinating facts about the stories and take part in some awesome activities designed to take their storytelling into orbit” (Roald Dahl Museum and Story Centre). The concept of the exhibit is for children to learn how Dahl wrote and practice that in their own writing. The exhibit is specifically designed for children aged 5-12, and provides six videos and blog posts outlining different tips and challenges for the children (Roald Dahl Museum and Story Centre). Simon writes, “the best participatory projects create new value for the institution, participants, and non-participating audience members” (Simon). There is potential for the Make Stories exhibit to be a successful participatory project. It provides the museum with new stories to potentially display, allows for participants to grow as writers and learn more about Dahl, and gives non-participating audience members the *possibility* of entertainment in seeing what the participants create. Unfortunately, it is once again the case that the exhibit falls-short in terms of finalization. The museum asks caregivers to share their creations on social media using #MakeStoriesLikeRoaldDahl (Roald Dahl Museum and Story Centre). While this exhibit would

parallel the unsuccess of the Museum at Home exhibit, it also creates an added layer of unsuccess in its lack of sustainability on social media. Looking at specifically at Twitter, the #MakeStoriesLikeRoaldDahl has minimal responses to it, and they are all from the Museum itself or staff members at the Museum (#MakeStoriesLikeRoaldDahl). This is to say, then, that there has been little to no interaction with the participatory project.

This paper's main focus is an expansion to the virtual museum that would incorporate both the Museum at Home and Make Stories online exhibits. When looking at expansions to the exhibits, the question arose of what was missing to them already. As stated previously, Simon believes the best participatory projects bring an added value to the museum and visitors (Simon). The shortcomings of the exhibits have already been discussed, with a central theme of a lack of follow-through and engagement with children after the act of completing the activity is over. This is to say that the best expansion would create a space for the children to share their creations on the exhibit itself. This paper proposes just that. Called the "At Home Writing Hut" after Dahl's own writing hut, this expansion would feature a section of the Roald Dahl Museum website where the children can post their creations freely, with minimal assistance from adults. The At Home Writing Hut would be fully protected and watched with virtual security for the safety of the children. It would allow for the kids to choose from three options. The first, 'Write Like Roald Dahl', uses the foundations of the Make Stories exhibit. The children would watch the videos of Dahl's tips and tricks and then write a story based on the prompts provided. The second option, 'Design the Exhibits', uses the Museum at Home craft activities as its foundation. It asks children to create their artwork and share it in the At Home Writing Hut. Children would have the option of either uploading a photo of their physical craft or creating the craft online through the exhibit. The final option is 'Write Your Own Stories' which allows children to use

their imagination and create their own stories. All three of these options encourage children to share their creations on the At Home Writing Hut. Visitors can then click on the posts of different children, read/view their creations, and interact with them either with a like or a comment. The work featured in the At Home Writing Hut will then be featured in an exhibit at the museum as well. The creations will be broadcasted on screens in real time. Visitors will have the opportunity to take part in the activities at the Museum, and interact with the children's postings on the website.

If the expansion continues with the age range of 5-12, assistance will most likely be needed by an adult for the younger children to engage with the At Home Writing Hut. Unfortunately, this is almost inevitable. The hope is that the program will be designed as kid-friendly as possible to make it easier for children to engage with it themselves. J. Cassell and K. Ryokai speak to the importance of having children engage with these projects themselves, writing, "one essential aspect of children's spontaneous storytelling play is that it is child-driven...so, if technology is going to encourage children's creativity and, in particular, play a role in children's storytelling play, it must not dampen that child-driven aspect of their play" (Cassell and Ryokai 170). It is important, then, that in implementing this expansion, care is taken to ensure that the virtual aspects of the project still allow for children to grow in their creativity. Research also shows that when children lead creative projects themselves, they gain more than when they interact with a project created and led by adults. Gerison Lansdown argues that children, "taking part in an activity organized by adults is not participation" (5). This is an added layer to the understanding that the original Museum at Home and Make Stories exhibits were not meeting their participatory potential, but also is important when implementing the expansion. If the expansion were to continue the reliance on adults it would only further the issues of the

original exhibits and be counterintuitive to the needs of children at the museum. Lansdown furthers to say, “there is a growing body of evidence indicating that where children are given opportunities to participate, they acquire greater levels of competence, which in turn enhances the quality of participation” (10). By allowing children to participate, it not only benefits them, but also benefits the museum. The better the participation levels are, the more likely it will be that children and adults will share the activities with their friends, creating a chain reaction and a thriving exhibit.

The benefit of the At Home Writing Hut is two-fold. Most apparently, it encompasses the original goals of the museum, but also the mantra of Dahl himself. Dahl’s mission was to, “amaze, thrill, and inspire generations of children and their parents” (Roald Dahl). At its core, the At Home Writing Hut aims to do this. Dahl is an exciting person, and providing children with the opportunity to learn from him allows for inspiration. Simon writes, “when you are driven by the desire to create new value, you end up with products that are transformative” (Simon). That is the goal of Dahl, the museum, and this expansion. Creating a space for children to share their writing and art with each other, to bond, grow, and learn with each other is a perfect product of participatory projects. Research on participation in museums states that, “by responding to the needs and interests of visitors...museums can transfer from being about something to being for somebody” (Andre, Durksen, and Volman 48). The collaborative creativity in this proposed expansion allows the Roald Dahl Museum to be *for* somebody. It’s for the children, for the viewers, and even for Dahl himself. The Museum’s goal is, of course, to memorialize the excitement and joy Dahl brought into this world, and this expansion allows for that.

The expansion and creation of the At Home Writing Hut exhibit not only benefits the museum, but strongly supports the education of the young participants. Lansdown writes that,

“children learn best through participation,” and despite the size of the project itself, at its core the At Home Writing Hut provides children with the opportunity to learn about writing and art. The exciting thing about art and writing is that it does not necessarily *feel* like learning – at least, not in the way children are used to. Caitlin McMunn Dooley writes that children are not thinking about learning while they are at museums, they are simply playing (129), but when studies categorize child-driven exercises in museums, they are almost always categorized as “learning-based” (McMunn Dooley 131). This is to say that without even being aware of it, children are actively engaging with each other in ways that parallel education. This allows the museum to provide them the space to foster this education in fun ways that do not expose the educational intent. The education of children through creativity is not simple, though, and is represented in many different areas of their growth. Chelsea Snyders writes, “essential aspects of development – including critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity – are all fostered through writing” (406). Rather than attempting to create a project that intentionally fosters all these areas of development, having children write based on a mixture of prompts and imagination is a seamless way of promoting their growth. It also allows for children to draw on prior knowledge, building on their schemas, as children are naturally drawn to using a mixture of visual language, drawing, and writing to communicate and express their emotions (Snyders 406). Creating a platform that engages both visual and written communication, then, means the At Home Writing Hut will allow children to both gain knowledge, and share their prior knowledge with the other children in their posts.

The Roald Dahl Museum encompasses incredible amounts of potential in engaging children in participatory projects. Their Museum at Home and Make Stories exhibits aim to foster creativity in visitors. Their downfall is seen in the lack of follow-through for sharing the

art and writing of the children, thus creating unsustainable and unsuccessful exhibits. The goal of this paper was to propose an expansion of these two exhibits to create the At Home Writing Hut, a space for children to share their creations and engage with one-another. Scholars are very open with the fact that there is little research on the effects on children's learning in museums (Andre, Durksen, and Volman 49). By creating a platform that is educational, creative, collaborative, and sustainable, there is room for the At Home Writing Hut exhibit to not only educate children, but educate scholars on participatory projects for children. While additional research would be needed for implementation, there is room for success with a creative space that fosters education in young museum attendees.

Works Cited

Andre, L., Durksen, T. & Volman, M.L. "Museums as avenues of learning for children: a decade of research." *Learning Environ Res*, vol. 20, 2017, pp. 47-76.

Cassell, J., Ryokai, K. “Making Space for Voice: Technologies to Support Children’s Fantasy and Storytelling.” *Personal and Ubiquitous Computing*, vol. 5, 2001, pp. 169-190.

Dooley, Caitlin McMunn, and Meghan M. Welch. “Nature of Interactions Among Young Children and Adult Caregivers in a Children’s Museum.” *Early Childhood Education Journal*, vol. 42, no. 2, Feb. 2014, pp. 125–132.

Lansdown, G. “Participation and young children.” *Every Child Matters*, Nov. 2004, pp. 4-15.

“#MakeStoriesLikeRoaldDahl.” *Twitter.com*. Accessed 17 December 2020.

“Roald Dahl.” *The Official Roald Dahl Website*, <https://www.roalddahl.com/roald-dahl>.

Accessed 07 December 2020.

Simon, Nina. *The Participatory Museum*. Museum 2.0, 2010. Free Ebook/online reading.

<http://www.participatorymuseum.org/>

Snyders, Chelsea Sue Bahnson. “‘I Wish We Could Make Books All Day!’ An Observational Study of Kindergarten Children During Writing Workshop.” *Early Childhood Education Journal*, vol. 42, no. 6, Oct. 2014, pp. 405–414.

“The Roald Dahl Museum and Story Centre.” *The Official Roald Dahl Website*,

<https://www.roalddahl.com/museum>. Accessed 07 December 2020.