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ENG 910

Dec. 18<sup>th</sup>/2020

“Can You Tell Me How to Get to Sesame Street?” Exhibit Analysis and Extension

The Strong National Museum of Play (located in Rochester, New York) has a Sesame Street Exhibit titled, “Can You Tell Me How to Get to Sesame Street?” running from 2011 until present day. In this exhibit, co-created by producers of the successful television series itself, the actual set of Sesame Street has been recreated piece by piece, along with its classic “123” green door stoop. The exhibit includes many interactive options for young children by taking aspects of the show (Being able to “cook” in Cookie Monster’s Food Truck, sitting in Big Bird’s Nest, and reading in Gina’s Daycare, to name a few examples), making it a sensory, fun filled experience. While there is much to be excited about when it comes to this exhibit, I believe that it could be further extended by including other educational elements, just as the series itself does, in order to incorporate both play and further learning. These extensions would include a section where children could learn basic sign language through video and accompanying signage, and a storytelling corner.

In terms of learning for young children, a hands-on approach has been regarded by professionals as the best way to implement learning. The Sesame Street exhibit at The Strong already applies this, as there are multiple activities where the children get to actually incorporate touch into what’s around them, such as getting to “cook a meal” in Cookie Monster’s Food Truck (accompanied by an actual model of the vehicle, along with plastic vegetables, bread, and utensils. There are also areas where they can play hopscotch with other kids, as well as chess.

While these activities are no doubt enjoyable for children, I propose that an extension can be made to the exhibit, which incorporates *Sesame Street's* original and main intent: to teach children about the world around them. When *Sesame Street* was first introduced in 1969, by Children's Television Workshop (CTW), its goal was to both educate and entertain children, from kindergarten to grade school. When creating the tv series, it is explained in the article, "Children's Television Programming" (2002) that the Sesame Street Workshop was founded with a mission to create a new "hybrid" model of learning, one that developed a purpose, format, setting and characters, in order to help children to learn (Cohen et al. 4). In Mavis Reimer's article, "Tell Me How To Get to Sesame Street" (2013), Reimer goes in-depth about how the original *Sesame Street* came to be, citing that the show's curriculum was both based on pedagogical theories of the day and prioritized "competence in symbolic representations" (letters and numbers), "cognitive processes" (classification and problem solving), and the "acquisition of social competence"-- specifically with teaching children how to play fairly and kindly with one another (Reimer 4). Keeping this in mind, Reimer cites that subsequent studies have shown the positive effects this geared programming has had towards child development; with the growing popularity of *Sesame Street* throughout the 1970s, it soon became the norm for young children to enter school already knowing the alphabet, and a 1994 study with high schoolers showed that those who had watched the educational program at a young age typically showed better results in English, Science, and Math (Reimer 2-3).

In my extension, an area of learning I would like to see covered is a storytelling corner, where school-aged children, perhaps from the ages of four to nine, could sit and listen to a curator read aloud from a *Sesame Street* picture book, such as "We're Different, We're the Same" by Bobbi Jane Kates, "Grover's Own Alphabet" by Salvatore Murdocca, or "Oscar's

Book” by Jeff Moss. This could be twice, every day from Monday to Friday at designated time in the morning and afternoon. When a live reading is not occurring, there could be either a projector or tv set playing a read-along of selected *Sesame Street* books, so that children, as they play, could listen along, or sit down and watch the book being displayed. I propose that a “Wall of Knowledge” could be set up, where there is a large, empty wall, meant for sticking colourful pieces of paper or post-it notes with lessons that the children have learned from the book they have just listened to. A curator could help guide these messages by prompting the children by asking one fact that they learned, what was one character they liked, or, more specifically, what is one nice thing they want other kids their age to know. After their message is written with the help of a guardian, or little drawing done, it would be stuck to the wall. This wall would have enough room for at least a hundred messages, and a picture could be taken of it to be posted to The Strong’s website before having them removed when there is no more space. In “Museums as Avenues of Learning for Children: A Decade of Research” (2017), it is explained that researcher K. Allison Wickens had found that a “three-mode structure”, which included story time, a tour of the exhibit, and a hands-on activity, greatly benefited the children who came into the museum, describing that the “three-mode structure” helped facilitate children’s learning and “comfort” as it combined something they were familiar with in their daily lives (story time) with “art-making” activities (Andre et al. 60). I am hoping that children engaging with the lessons they have learned through these books via writing down something important they learned will help cement that knowledge.

In addition to read-aloud story time and the showing of video, in order to make these activities even more accessible, I propose these videos also include real-time American Sign Language being used. In “Rethinking Disability Symposium Museum of Liverpool” (2019),

Harriet Dunn explains that providing access to museums for those with disabilities is not enough, that if exhibitions do not “surround” lived experiences, then “this group of people still remains marginalized” (Dunn 363). In order to help combat this, in even a small way, I believe a wall that includes video tutorials on how to do basic ASL could be set up, playing simple to follow videos on how to greet another child that is hard of hearing or Deaf; “Thank you” and “Please”, “Goodbye”, “Are you hurt?”, and other common phrases, as well as how to sign the alphabet. The museum could also hire a curator who is fluent in ASL to teach lessons to the children, every day for an hour at a designated time. This would be done in order to normalize to hearing children that encountering other children who use sign language/have a hearing disability is common, and that you can still have a conversation and play with this new friend, it just takes a bit of effort to learn how to communicate in a different way.

Nina Simon, in her book, *The Participatory Museum* (2010), highlights how through participation true learning occurs, as she has carved out the meaning of a “Traditional Institution” vs a “Participatory Institution”, where in the former, the institution is meant to act as a stand alone, while in the latter, museum goes participate in the institution and give back to it creatively, allowing for future projects to come about based on the experiences of participants; it is the improving of a museum or exhibit through visitor engagement, and thus the improving of how everyone learns (Simon Chapter 1). In Chapter 2, Simon speaks to “pulling out meaning” from a museum visit, with children and adults alike being offered different avenues of learning in an exhibit, such as an optional audio tour. The “Can You Tell Me...” exhibit already has multiple activities for children to peruse, but it is through adding a story time corner and sign language learning that I believe, children will naturally drift towards these things and begin learning something new.

In addition to the “Wall of Knowledge”, I believe young museum visitors could also benefit from a drawing area in which they are encouraged to come up with their own *Sesame Street* character. This drawing area would be supplied with the necessary art materials to do so, and the children would be encouraged to truly bring their character to life by thinking of its favourite food, favourite activities, and a special quality they have. After the drawing is completed, there would be a “show and tell” segment where the children would be divided into groups with a leader and asked to introduce their new friend. A picture of the character would then be taken by a staff member and uploaded on to the museum’s website under a subsection called, “Sesame Street’s Friends” for everyone to see. By having children imagine their own characters, or to an extent, themselves, within the world of *Sesame Street*, the values of the show and exhibit (being a kind neighbour, waiting your turn when playing with others, accepting others' differences) could be further appreciated and taken more seriously.

In conclusion, “Can You Tell Me How to Get to Sesame Street?” has been a popular exhibit running for nearly ten years at The Strong’s National Museum of Play, bringing in young fans of the series and providing a hands-on approach through the remaking of the set. Through an extension of the museum, which includes live-storytelling, a “Wall of Knowledge”, the incorporation of ASL, and a character drawing center, I believe that the exhibit could extend its learning opportunities and become an educational tool, similar to how the beloved *Sesame Street* tv show has been for decades.

## Works Cited

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