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The universal museum

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In this presentation I would like to explore three facets of the concept of a 'universal museum'. Museums are about creating new knowledge and engaging with audiences in the mutual sharing, dissemination and valuing of that knowledge. The engine behind this is the museum collection, and that is where museums are different from other kinds of institutions. That collection is inextricably linked with audiences and visitors. Without this engagement with the public, onsite, offsite and online, we would cease to be museums and would be simply warehouses or storehouses. Many museums were founded for educational purposes and have moved on from the early days of just 'tolerating' visitors - a phrase that some museums used. Museums have moved from merely tolerating visitors to actively encouraging them, and I think the best museums these days are empowering visitors to make choices, and to develop what we term 'learning journeys' to access different kinds of learning and different sorts of experiences.

The agenda for education has now evolved into an agenda for learning across a range of areas, and currently the sector is developing what we are terming 'generic learning outcomes'. The five generic learning outcome areas are knowledge and understanding, skills, attitudes and values, enjoyment, inspiration and creativity, and behaviour and progression. These generic learning outcomes are now likely to be being written into the funding agreements for museums. For example, the [British Museum](#) receives £39 million a year in grant aid, and increasingly I expect the kind of education opportunities we can provide will be tied to evidencing these generic learning outcomes. This is going to apply across all subjects currently being taught in museums, particularly history.

Recent research from [MORI](#) shows that parents view museums as the most important places for educating their children, after schools and libraries, and one of the most trustworthy sources of information, more valued than books, radio, newspapers and the Internet. In the largest survey of its kind carried out in Leicester some very high figures came forward from teachers and pupils about the value of learning in museums. 95 per cent of the teachers surveyed found regional museums to be very important to their teaching, 73 per cent of teachers said museums were excellent for learning new subjects, and 90 per cent of Key Stage 2 children enjoyed learning new things at museums. [Tracy Borman](#) mentioned the numbers involved in heritage learning - the national museums alone this year will probably receive 1.75 million school pupil visits. Museums are powerful learning centres, and perhaps of all subjects, it is the teaching of history which has most traditionally been enhanced and amplified by visits to museums.

Across the country there are many examples of history teachers working with museum staff, undertaking visits and projects, and museum education teams very open to working with teachers to run special projects or visit experiences. What does a museum experience offer history teachers and students? First, the collections: they are rich, they are deep, they concern real objects and real research. Second, there is the opportunity for access to experts, both audience experts and subject matter experts. Next is the physical experience of the museum, its environment and the kind of the facilities that it can offer. Fourth are cross-curricular opportunities - I think that if my colleagues wanted me to press one point home today it would be the cross-curricular value of museums. It is something we are able to do well within Key Stage 2 although it can become harder at Key Stages 3 and 4 and with further education groups. Many museums are iconic in terms of their subject matter: [British Museum](#) - Classical civilizations, [Imperial War Museum](#) - Holocaust and WW2, [National Maritime Museum](#) - Trafalgar, and so on. [Tracy Borman](#) mentioned the hybrid history GCSE, and on 21 March 2005 the British Museum is hosting a conference run by the [Qualifications and Curriculum Authority \(QCA\)](#), [Oxford, Cambridge and RSA Examinations \(OCR\)](#) and the [Group for Education in Museums \(GEM\)](#) to begin to develop that kind of approach with vocational history learning and vocational elements of history. Lastly within what the museum experience can offer is the quality of networking and ubiquity - the first of my facets of the universal museum. That is to say that in the UK, I believe teachers and students have almost unparalleled access to a range of collections, resources and knowledge - a twist on the notion of the single universal museum. There are many types of museums. Some network together very well, some not so well, and there are now hubs in the regions with dedicated education staff and organisations to work through, such as [GEM](#) and the [Campaign for Learning in Museums and Galleries](#). Our job is increasingly to work together better and to turn that depth of collections and knowledge across the UK into real learning opportunities.

The second area to which I would like to apply the idea of the universal museum is that of new technologies. Museums have been particularly busy in digitising content, and are now beginning to think more intently about how to use that digitised content for learning purposes. In 2002, the number of virtual visitors to UK museums overtook the number of physical visitors. There is currently a wide range of highly innovative projects underway across UK museums, including CD/DVD initiatives, video conferencing, digital image and asset capture, PDAs, wireless technologies, white board teaching, 3-D visualisation, and so on. Museums are being highly innovative in the use of digital technologies and are very open to working with organisations and individuals to develop ideas. However, it does raise questions for us about the real and virtual, and about the role of objects. It challenges us with space and time, where people learn, how they learn and why they learn, and it challenges the engagement with visitors. But it also allows our collections and exhibitions to be more permeable. If I go and stand this morning at the Rosetta Stone I can see crowds packed around it, but I have no idea what they are thinking about, how they are relating to that object or not. But we are beginning to use digital technologies and digital 'graffiti projects', as we are calling them, to capture people's ideas, thoughts and reactions to things. Digital technologies will revolutionise the way museums exhibit and engage with their audiences, and the Holy Grail for this is interactivity. Far from threatening the notion of the Universal Museum, technology will I believe, support, extend and re-engineer it, in ways we can as yet only guess at.

My third manifestation of the universal museum is perhaps what we understand as the traditional sense of the term universal museum - that is, for example, the [British Museum's](#) bringing together the different cultural traditions of humanity under one roof. Universal museums are museums which, through their exhibitions and permanent displays, endow their iconic pieces with a worldwide context within which their full significance can be apprehended as virtually nowhere else. Eighteen of the world's great museums and galleries have signed a statement supporting the idea of the universal museum, and these museums see themselves as serving not just one nation but the citizens of all nations. They are agents in the development of culture, creating knowledge through the continuous process of reinterpretation. At the [British Museum](#), we have reaffirmed our founding principles of the museum as a museum of the world for the world; a collection held for the benefit of all the world, present and future, free of charge; a forum where many different cultural perspectives can be expressed; a place to embrace the whole world and to increase understanding of the links between and influences across different societies; a place where the UK's different communities can explore their inheritances; a place where people can address questions on contemporary politics, religious diversity and international relations. At the universal museum, people can consider their place in the world and see different parts of that world as indissolubly linked, they can find a different way to comprehend the world and see the world as pattern, as process, as system, and where a multitude of truths can be fostered to ensure that the full complexity of issues can be understood, rather than attempting to provide simple and essentially reductive notions of identity.

Reading these principles, I am forcibly reminded of what [Michael Wood](#) referred to earlier as the role and the value of the humanities. If you look at these

principles as a mission for the museum, many of those phrases are absolutely crucial in working in support of the humanities and with teachers and students. This redefinition of the principles of the [British Museum](#) as the universal museum has had some interesting manifestations in the last two years. In a combination of exhibitions, trails, programming and targeted events, the museum has sought to set contemporary cultural and geopolitical issues in a wider context by both enabling and endorsing a range of different perspectives. In other words, the museum is opening up with different kinds of views, different sorts of significances and values. So the museum has shown that it is not just defined by what it holds, but also by what it does with its collections. This kind of approach has been most to the fore in the activities with which we have engaged with Iraq, with Sudan, with our current work for Africa and with the forthcoming exhibition we are doing on Persia. In the cases of Iraq and Sudan, in addition to programming and display, we hosted high-level stakeholder discussions supported by the [Guardian](#) and chaired by Jon Snow, exploring cultural heritage, politics and identity. And for [Africa 05](#), which is a big festival across London, we have invited comment on objects from different cultural perspectives, as well as commissioning contemporary art from Mozambique, and having sculptures made from decommissioned weapons.

The [British Museum](#) is now looking ahead, and questioning what it can do uniquely around a certain exhibition. Can we do things here in London that cannot be done elsewhere? For future exhibitions we will be looking at contemporary twists, and welcoming different significances, setting historic and archaeological material within the present political context. What at first glance looks like a politicisation of the museum and its role, is in fact a redefinition of its original founding purposes. For Sudan, we took the decision to go ahead in the autumn with a major loan from Khartoum, dropping our admission charge and instead inviting collections for the Darfor Appeal. The [British Museum's](#) longevity gives it a particular gravitas in terms of this kind of relationship. For example, over a hundred years the museum has had ongoing relations with the Sudan, so this is not a tokenistic, one-off approach. We felt it had never been more important to understand the different civilisations and complex history of this, the largest country in Africa, and we had a vibrant programme around it, looking at myth, reality, travelogues, discovery, literature and film.

We are actively seeking to explore this kind of programme within formal education and informal education, across schools, higher and further education, as well as seeking to support specific curriculum and content needs. We need to explore with colleagues in history teaching, training and research the value of the universal museum and how approaches across geography and time can offer insight, provoke interest, create challenge and ultimately contribute to our understanding of each other for our mutual benefit. I sense a real change in terms of museum education, certainly within my institution, moving away from the formulaic curricula-driven approaches, to thinking about how, with this material and these contemporary global challenges, we can begin to reinvent what museum education is about. So by seeking to relate the present and future challenges to the past and by provoking discussion of significance and value, we will hopefully be on our way to see museums not as fixed repositories of knowledge and of objects, but as dynamic cultural entities, embracing and encouraging reinterpretation and lively debate.

If I were to give you one reason why I think the museum is right in doing this I would ask you to think about how humanity is going to make it out of this century, both in terms of how we relate to each other and also our impact on the environment. That is the kind of challenge and agenda that the museum I work at, among others, is now considering with greater energy.

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