INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE IN 21ST CENTURY MUSEUMS: MUSEUM EDUCATORS' PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract

Many museums around the world are providing engaging and participatory educational programs and exhibits, and reshaping their missions, structures, and staff to become more inclusive and to create and promote intercultural dialogue in their spaces. This qualitative study aims to understand the perceptions of museum educators regarding inclusive museums, intercultural dialogue practices in museums and explore necessary intercultural competence skills for museum educators. Several key findings emerged from the analysis of the data: In inclusive museums visitors feel welcome and belonged and their multiple needs are considered; museums should reflect the diversity of their community in their staff and their programs; museums should critically and continuously examine themselves and their educational programs; crucial intercultural competence skills for museum educators are flexibility, adaptivity, dynamism and openness; and financial restrictions should not discourage museum educators for creating professional trainings.

Keywords: Intercultural competence, intercultural dialogue, museum education, inclusive museums.

1. Introduction

In the 21st century, museums have been transformed from being strict and elitist institutions to being active, innovative, and participatory institutions (Simon, 2010). Therefore, current discussions in the museum world have focused on creating more diverse and inclusive museum practices; becoming more socially responsive; and meeting the needs and expectations of a diverse population of visitors (Falk, 2016; Mason, 2004; Schultz, 2011). The literature on inclusive museums suggest that museums should establish a new trust with the communities they serve; redefine their roles, missions, and commitments; become more visitor oriented and integrate diversity and inclusion as institutional values and as initiatives into their main work (Cole, 2014; Falk, 2016; Weil, 2012).

Most of the empirical research on inclusive museums are conducted in the field of visitor studies. Many visitor studies indicate that there are different types of visitors with divergent needs and interests; museum visitors gain learning and therapeutic benefits from participation; museums have social values and responsibilities; and museums are highly valued public forums for encountering and negotiating social issues (Everett & Barrett, 2011). The empirical research on inclusion also focuses on the importance of accessibility. The studies in this area mostly explore the importance of accessible curatorial and educational design practices in museums (Dodd, 2015, Rappolt-Schlichtmann & Daley, 2013).

The number of studies focusing intercultural dialogue and intercultural competence in museums and intercultural trainings for museum professionals is very limited. Most of the studies on intercultural thought and intercultural competence in museums are conducted in Europe and they mostly focus on the perspectives and experiences of immigrant communities. These studies show that intercultural practices in museums can positively affect social inclusion and creating intercultural dialogue in museums is a process of change that requires time and effort (Egholk, & Jensen, 2016; Giusti, 2013; Vermeulen, Vermeylen, Maas, de Vet, & van Engel, M., 2019).

While those studies mainly focus on the perspectives of museum visitors, little academic work has focused on the perspectives of museum educators. This study research aims to fill this gap by focusing on museum educators' perspectives on inclusive museums and record their efforts on intercultural dialogue and suggestions for intercultural competence trainings. This exploration is guided by the following research questions: RQ1: What does inclusive museum mean for museum educators? RQ2: How can 21st century museums enhance professional and institutional intercultural competencies?

2. Methods

The primary data collection method for this study is semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews can elicit a depth of data that is difficult to gather by other means and reveal insights that go beyond the data collected in everyday conversation (Fontana & Frey, 2003). The interview protocol was

developed with questions that are designed to initiate thoughts about three major domains: inclusive museums; intercultural dialogue in museums; and intercultural competence trainings for museum professionals. The semi-structured, open-ended, in-depth interviews allowed this study to explore participants' personal perceptions more deeply, and, in this way, rich and descriptive data was collected. For this study, ~1-hour interviews were conducted with three museum educators. The participants were selected from three different museums in the United States. All the participants have been working in the museum education field at least for five years.

3. Results

The data analysis yielded to several important findings on the issues of inclusive museums and intercultural competence. All the participants mentioned that in inclusive museums visitors feel welcome and belonged. When I asked about what the idea of inclusive museum means to them, all the participants mentioned the importance of the feeling welcomed and being belonged to the museum space. All three participants gave a lot of specific examples on how to make a museum more inclusive, such as designing the museum space for different physical needs, creating multi language signs for exhibits and being more inviting to non-traditional museum visitors.

The importance of participation was another key element when participants defined inclusive museums and shared their efforts in creating cultural dialogue in their programs. It is vital that museums increase public access to their activities and services and integrate visitors to their identity and programs. However, the participants mentioned that the lack of cultural representation and the cost of admission are the two main obstacles that prevent diverse museum participation. With having different types of visitors with divergent needs and interests; museums need to provide accessible curatorial, educational, and technological and universal design practices. Additionally, museums should continuously critically examine themselves and self-reflect on their roles and works. As one of the participants said when creating intercultural programs, they should think "who they are actually serving, and who they are not serving".

Staff diversity is another theme that reflected in the interviews. All the participants agreed that being an inclusive museum and creating cultural dialogue is not only about the visitors and museums should reflect the diversity of their community in their staff. According to a report published in 2015, the positions of museum curators, educators, conservators, and especially the museum leadership are not reflecting the diversity of US population (Schonfeld, Westermann& Sweeney, 2015). However, according to the participants of this study, the museum world is widely aware of that, and a lot of museum professionals are working slowly but eagerly on changing that.

The data analysis also provides important findings for the importance of intercultural competence in museum education. Participants mentioned that flexibility, adaptivity, dynamism and openness are crucial intercultural competence skills that are needed for museum educators and those skills need to be emphasized in professional trainings. Another important finding on intercultural competence is that to achieve institutional intercultural competence, museums need interculturally competent individuals working at their institutes.

The study participants highlighted the importance of personal efforts of museum educators to create an institutional change in their workplaces. All three participants mentioned the variety of opportunities that are available for museum professionals to learn more on the issues of equity, inclusion, and diversity and to face their own unconscious biases. They think that this personal effort can easily reflect in museum professionals' own work and benefit the overall institutional intercultural competence.

As non-profit institutions, financial restriction is usually a problem for museums, especially when it comes to professional development opportunities for their staff. However, all the participants think that money is not a must for intercultural trainings in museums. Having the right mindset is more important than having sufficient budgets for staff trainings. All three participants shared their creative and cost-effective ways of self and institutional development opportunities such as reading and discussing about museum case studies and attending local museum and education conferences.

4. Discussion and conclusions

The findings of this study show that museums must be more open to the needs and ideas of their community. Therefore, 21st century museums should demystify themselves and should be more open and welcoming for everyone. Museums must move beyond simply setting goals and developing outreach programs to reach a deeper level of engagement. Visitors must be integrated into the museums' vision and identity, permeating all levels of the organizations. In other words, the visitor must be the core focus.

Additionally, museums should integrate inclusion initiatives into their main work. Most museums (both in staff and visitors) still do not reflect the demographics of the communities they serve. A good starting point would be developing better hiring processes. In addition to providing

equitable hiring process that can lead to diverse participation, like other sites, museums should "state a vision and set goals related to equity and intercultural development for its staff" (Dejaehere & Cho, 2009, p. 446) and act immediately to account for differing intercultural competencies among staff members. Every museum professional must do personal work to face unconscious bias and they need to do self-reflection work since institutional intercultural competence starts from the individual. Museums do not need to wait for acquiring large grants or budget approvals. To provide these trainings, museums can start with small steps such as organizing weekly article discussions, encouraging their staff to attend local professional organizations and conferences.

In intercultural research and training, it is important that both researchers and practitioners should work together to synthesize theory and practice (Landis & Bhawuk, 2004). When intercultural trainings for museum professionals are designed, their specific needs (such as flexibility, adaptivity, openness and dynamism) should be considered.

All these suggestions can be considered for new topics of future research. This study can also be replicated and extended by expanding the sample size, interviewing with museums professionals from variety of locations, types of museums and departments. In addition to in depth interviews, surveys can be conducted with larger sample size. Working with museum professionals and intercultural communication scholars, specific intercultural and inclusive museum trainings can be designed for museum educators and this process can be documented as a new research study.

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