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Learning by going – and doing?

Grant Bage and Siobhan Edwards

(The National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts)

There is a technology older than radio or television, which interprets people for themselves, and that technology is story. It is one of the oldest cultural, intellectual, psychological and historical artefacts that we have. But there are other things that we need in order to turn stories of the past into history, and Siobhan Edwards and I are going to talk about two of them: questions and ideas – big ideas, preferably. The National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts (NESTA) is a lottery-funded endowment. We were given £200 million in 1998 and told to invest the interest in fostering creativity and innovation in the UK through: investing in businesses, in social enterprises, in people (we have a Fellowship programme) and also in the programme that Siobhan and I work on, the Learning programme.

The first idea I would like to touch on is the social element of museum visiting. With whom did you go on your last visit to a museum? When we look at the average group of users for museums, most people tend to go in pairs or groups, small groups or large groups. It is a very social experience, particularly if we are talking about school visits. Another idea is the idea of personalisation. Within the learning programme at NESTA there is Illuminate, an initiative launched in October 2004, at the same time as a review of learning with digital technologies came our from our sister organisation, NESTA Futurelab. Illuminate concerns the personalisation and reinterpretation of museum and gallery collections with the help of new technologies.

NESTA has a brief which encompasses science, technology and the arts, and looks at the crossovers between the three. What Illuminate hopes to do is to focus on the museum, gallery, science and discovery centre sector, and bring them together. We want museums, galleries and science and discovery centres to focus on how visitors look at and use their collections, and how technology can be used. It does not have to be high-tech, and we are not just talking about Personal Digital Assistants (PDAs), although that is one route. Refreshing the interpretation of a particular collection is vital in maintaining both visitor interest and high educational expectations, and Illuminate is a scheme to help fund that. We have already gone through the process of deciding the projects that we want to fund in Round 1 of the scheme and I thought it would be helpful to give you three examples of the sort of reinterpretation that we are interested in.

We have had a proposal from a science centre which framed a project using torches. The 'torch' will be a tool for the visitor to shine on objects, in order to receive and choose different information via speech, image or text. In this sense the torch is a questioning device, helping people to think critically and to think about different ways of interpreting objects or places.

A second proposal intends to alter the way we look at historical objects. We tend to think of history as being old, but one of the really important ideas that museums, teachers, storytellers and filmmakers can communicate is that history is about a time when these objects were *new*. So within this proposal, there is a three-metre-tall statue of a fourteenth-century saint. It is simply an old block of stone. But, of course, it is not as it would have been in the fourteenth century, when this beautiful stone would have been obscured with lots and lots of paint. This is a very important idea for educators in history, who must help young people in particular, when visiting a museum, to see these artefacts as when they were new, when they were in situ, when they were in context. If it is the case that children in school from five to sixteen years old will probably only experience medieval history once, then let us make it memorable. Let us give them really powerful visual and interpretive tools and icons to anchor that experience. That is why the Norton Priory Museum Trust have been given funding to create an accurate, three-dimensional image of their statue of St Christopher carrying the Christ child. This will allow visitors to interact with the statue on screen, applying and removing colours, as well as virtually carving into the 'sandstone'. The backdrop will be a carefully recreated image of how the Priory itself would have looked in the fourteenth century.

The third example is of a railway museum (part of the Tyne and Wear museums). They had the idea of getting local people and volunteers to record the sounds of railways and steam alongside those of the local landscape and environment, using MP3 players. It is an interesting project not only because it uses new technology but because it is about listening to the environments surrounding artefacts and objects. We thought it was a good way of using interpretation to engage people whose formal education may have ended a long time ago, and it is also of high value for visually impaired visitors. Accessibility is a key issue in museums, galleries and the whole sector, and this project shows that reinterpretation for a particular audience (people with visual impairments) can actually benefit much wider audiences.

We have seen three case studies in which technology and artefacts of the past are being combined in some way, to personalise learning. My apologies for using this cliché, but history really is all around us: and because we cannot escape it, that gives us a duty to ask some questions. Our duty as educators is to build on the enthusiasm that television archaeology, museum visits, good storytelling – live or on film – can generate. It really can motivate individuals, but only if somebody does something with it. The fact that it is so ubiquitous means it is essential that as well as being enthusiastic, we are also critical about what sort of images are portrayed. If we are going to personalise learning for any student, we ought to give them the space and time to talk about the Holocaust, *Time Team*, their visit to an English Heritage site or to the British Museum. We cannot do that if we have a narrative national history stuffed into the age range from five to fourteen, where it is currently compulsory, responding basically to political rather than educational imperatives. I would argue that we need to free up space within the curriculum for teachers to help learners to bathe and glory in the media riches of the libraries, archives and museum interpretations, education and representations of the past, that have been so richly illustrated this morning.