

NOTES AND REVIEWS

Making 1960s Come Alive — An Educator's Notes

by Wong Ying Wuen Vicky

Background

The National Museum of Singapore, from June to August 2010, embarked on a journey back to the 1960s with its various programmes for both the public and the schools. This was anchored to the *Singapore 1960* exhibition (3 June to 22 August), put together by two young curators, Jason Toh and Priscilla Chua. A Singapore-themed display, as past experiences have shown, is both appealing to some audiences and not to others. It is with this knowledge that the education kit — in the context of the exhibition — for students and teachers was developed.

An exhibition with a storyline drawn from the sixties easily appeals to people who can relate to this colourful era; the elderly who have lived through the 1960s would be eager to come and

Vicky Wong was trained in problem-based learning during her stint as an academic staff at Republic Polytechnic. She was first trained as a facilitator in the institution, before being made module chair and curriculum developer for the first year course she was facilitating. She successfully revamped the module to align it to the constructivist theory in learning and teaching. Before joining the institution, she taught at a private enrichment centre and worked full-time briefly with a local theatre group, The Finger Players. Her exposure to the performing arts and different teaching settings allowed her to explore to use of various mediums in educating young people. She also holds a Masters degree in South-east Asian Studies from the National University of Singapore and dabbles in photography and craft-making in her spare time.

reminisce their childhood days. The challenge, in this case, would be to make the exhibition appealing to the younger audience, especially students, who were born in the nineties. As a museum-based educator, I had to devise a tool that would allow the young today to relate to the past ideas, objects and icons presented in the exhibition.

Another challenge I had to face was educators' response towards the exhibition. 1960s — what else was there in this exhibition that students do not already know from their history and social studies lessons in school? The nation-building rhetoric becomes the focal point due to the mainstream narrative in the history / social studies curriculum. So how could we offer a relevant, complementary education kit with new perspectives, and convince educators that such an exhibition is worth visiting with their students?

After the successful run of the *Quest for Immortality, the World of Ancient Egypt* exhibition (22 December 2009 to 4 April 2010), a Singapore-themed exhibition seemingly lacked excitement and yet had a tough act to follow. Inspired by the curators' conceptualisation of the storyline for *Singapore 1960*, which focused on Singapore's socio-cultural history, I drew up an education kit in which I adopted reflection-based pedagogy and constructivist techniques.

At the National Museum of Singapore, we face many challenges when it comes to educational programmes for schools and students. Students tend to associate a visit to the Museum with the subjects of history and social studies, which in their opinion are unfortunately boring and "dead"; they find no meaning in knowing a past that is already gone. Indeed, most of us have been conditioned in school to be forward-looking, and to question our role in society in the present, as well as the future. Social pragmatism is the call of the day and inevitably, practical knowledge gained in the subjects of Science and Mathematics has an advantage over the Arts and Humanities.

Prior experiences in the museum do not help either. Traditional methods of using worksheets and didactic approaches to teach and learn in the museum fail to engage students productively. Students armed with worksheets have only one goal in their mind — to find the right answers and finish the worksheet so that

they can go home. Put simply, students do not see the relevance of social and cultural history. Their knowledge of history remains as a subject requiring massive memory work and smart copying to get their answers right and ace the examinations.

With this as a backdrop, the challenge of producing an education kit that appeals to both students and teachers seemed overwhelming. While I hoped to engage students in a more productive and appealing way, I also wished to provide adequate support for the teachers and educators so as to make the Museum trip for their students interesting and enriching. More importantly, we hoped to leave students and educators with more questions than answers — questions that they could bring back to the classroom for further discussions. History and heritage is not just about the past, but how we are situated in the present.

A Constructivist Approach

As an educator trained in using problem-based learning and a constructivist pedagogy, I do have my own prejudices and biases about how children and students are educated in school these days. While we see increasing changes being made to the curriculum and teaching methods, the changes may not be happening fast enough to capture the students caught in this age of transition. For too long, education is about training our children and students to perform well in tests and examinations. A good performance is a necessary prelude to better education, better jobs and by deduction, better lives. For too long, education was about getting students to perform in the right way, at the right time, in the right place. It is about a learned response, reinforced and executed in a pattern of repetition. However, this notion of teaching and education is now challenged and changed. Education is not about training for performance, it is also not about teaching someone what they need to understand. Education is about teaching someone how to understand and why they understand something the way they do. It started with the Sciences and Mathematics, and we can now apply the same theory and same philosophy to history, culture and heritage as well.

When one talks about constructivism, one will necessarily need to make references to Jean Piaget (1896–1980, a Swiss developmental psychologist) and his influential theory on cognitive development, as well as Lev Vygotsky’s (1896–1934, a Soviet psychologist) theory on social constructivism. The concept of constructivism emphasises and recognises the learner’s role — rather than the teacher’s — in the acquiring of knowledge; it is not just the teacher who imparts information, but that the learner already possesses the knowledge. The premise is that all learners have prior knowledge and new knowledge is built upon this prior knowledge. The teacher’s role is to guide the learner in acquiring the new information, which is added on to the existing corpus of knowledge.

Lev Vygotsky’s “zone of proximal development” theory identifies the stage in which children can do something that is beyond their current ability with some external help (Woolf: 114–7). Based on this notion, educators would offer the child the necessary support to build on his or her existence, helping the child to venture into new areas of information. It is with this concept that the education kit for *Singapore 1960* was developed.

Using Constructivism Theory to Aid Learning in the Museum

What does all this mean for education officers in a museum? The main strength of learning in the museum, unlike the classroom, is an object-centred, place-based and experiential learning environment. Firstly, students are no longer in their usual setting, surrounded by familiar teaching aids such as textbooks. The students now have to construct their understanding in new surroundings. They also come into contact with objects and artefacts, which they have not seen up close or even encountered before. Lastly, they are put in a multi-sensory and experiential space, where lighting, sound-scapes and multimedia techniques that are situated *vis-à-vis* the storyline of the exhibition are used to help them appreciate and make sense of this new knowledge that they are encountering. Thus it is important that the educators recognise

and make full use of this dynamic environment in order to facilitate the student's learning.

The first assumption that we need to make is that all students, no matter how young, will have some prior knowledge that can be used to trigger learning. For example, when students come across vinyl records, they will be able to relate this to compact discs which they have seen and used. Teachers can also help to draw out prior knowledge from the students before they arrive at the museum. Classroom activities can include some investigative work on the history of music. Students today are very familiar with digital music, yet the world of music was a very different one several decades ago — music, for example, was shared on a different platform before the advent of mp3 players or iPods. Such discussions would thus help students to make the connection from the past to what they know in the present and at the same time, breathe life into our heritage.

The second assumption we need to make is that students no longer require didactic teaching methods to learn. The subject can be made more interesting if the students are asked to take the initiative and search for the answers on their own. They can play “journalists” and find out who were the famous local singers and compare them to the ones today. We should move away from the traditional ways of getting students to hunt for ready answers within the galleries as it reinforces the idea that history is only about memory work.

The last assumption we need to make is the role of the learner. Indeed, collaborative work between the teacher and the students, or even among students themselves will spur them to problem-solve and construct their understanding together.

Using the Education Kit

The education kit was designed with several types of questions, in relation to the information found in both the booklet and the exhibition. The exhibition was a wonderful platform to engage the students with real objects. The kit and the dynamic questions presented in it allowed the students to engage with the object in an

active manner. They were made to relate the artefact by applying what they knew instead of merely observing from a distance.

The questions that I had designed aimed to:

1. Allow students to draw comparisons between the present and the past.
2. Relate the exhibition to observable behaviour or actions in their everyday life.
3. Get students to do investigative work with people they have access to, such as their parents and grandparents.
4. Make students do evaluation or assessment on a situation, and with that, prompt analysis and critical thinking.
5. Question that assumption and understanding of what they know.

Suggested answers and activities were included for educators. In fact, educators were encouraged to explore the use of their own questions and activities to engage their students. When educators take an active approach towards learning at the museum, the visit becomes a learning journey and the museum is no longer a mere destination. The museum becomes a mystery box, with questions requiring answers, with activities requiring engagement. With this experience, the museum intends to design more learning materials and workshops that will aid the educators and make the trips for students more meaningful.

SOURCES CONSULTED

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